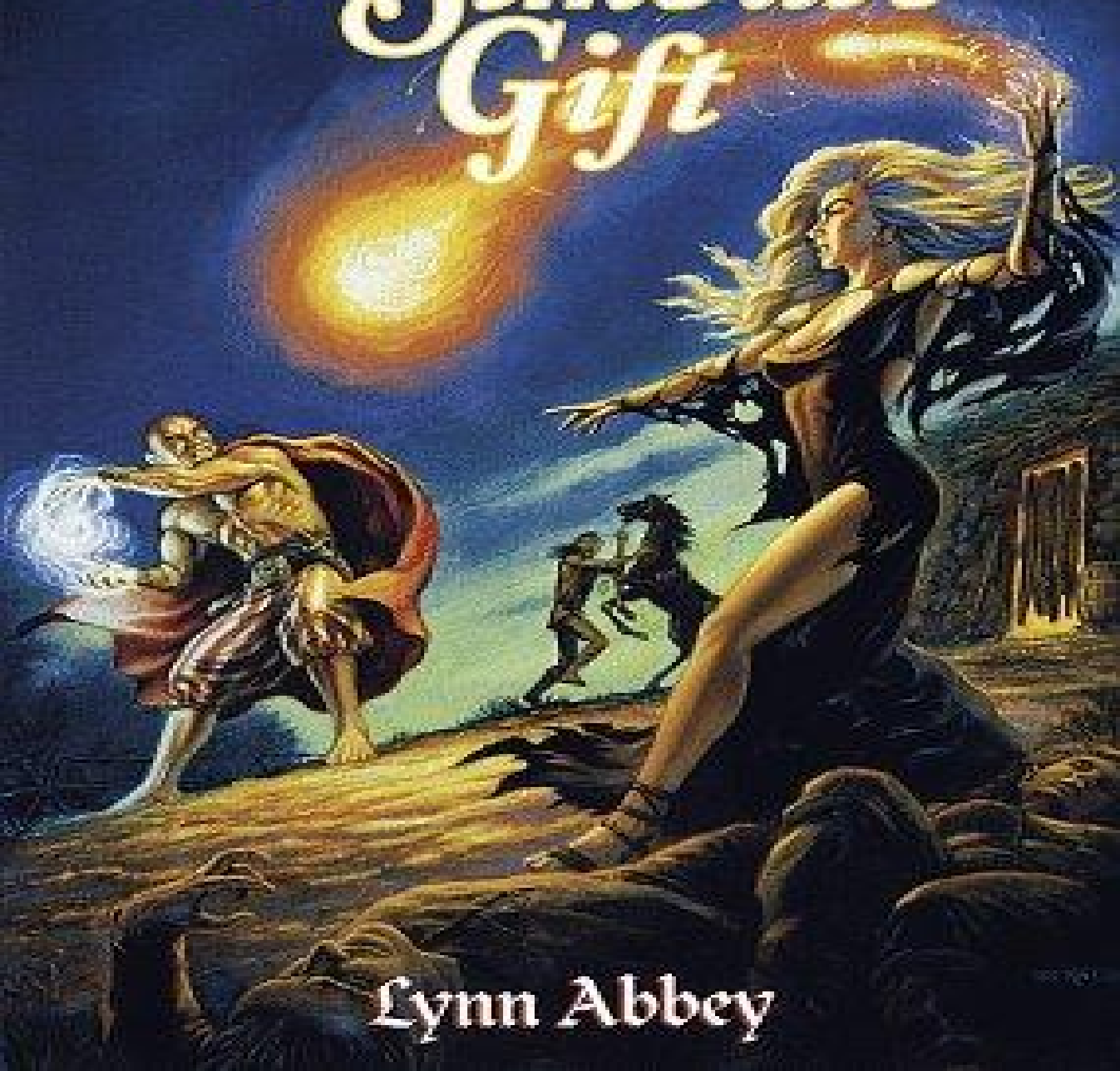


The Nobles - Book Six



The Simbul's Gift



Lynn Abbey

The Simbul's Gift
Book 6 of the Nobles series
A Forgotten Realms novel
by Lynn Abbey

For a heartbeat, Bro believed he'd lost something more precious than his mother's love. Then, with the knife hilt stinging his palm, he saw danger for him and the colt he'd raised. He saw, as well, that no matter what he did, the colt was doomed: Zandilar would have Dancer, had always had him. Bro found the strength to release the knife and wrap his arms around a trusting neck, to hide his face in a coarse, black mane.

"Good-bye," he whispered, not a word he'd trained the colt to understand.

Then, with a last pat, he offered the rope to Zandilar who had no use for it. Her mist-made form dissolved around the colt, obscuring him, consuming him, drawing him back into the small dark hole.

From the Concise History of the Chosen Seven written by Cirian,
Master Chronicler at Candlekeep, in the Year of the Blue Flame.

Filed—misfiled—by Mehgrin, apprentice at Candlekeep, on a dreary day when she had a headache.

The queen of Aglarond, called the Simbul and the witch-queen and many, many other, less complimentary names, is, in fact, Alassra Shentrantra, sixth of The Seven Chosen Sisters. The circumstances of her birth in Neverwinter in the Year of the Yearning are recorded elsewhere. Suffice to say, she was not yet two years of age when her mother, Elue Shundar, died and her father, Dornal, vanished from her life. The mage Elminster entrusted her to the Witches of Rashemen for her upbringing, telling the witches that Alassra was an orphan and without siblings.

Neither statement was true, but the witches, trusting

Elminster, believed him, and Alassra grew up believing the witches.

Alassra left Rashemen at the age of sixteen, leaving neither roots nor regrets. For decades she roamed Faerun in search of magic. She stopped wherever there was something to learn, and stayed only until she had mastered it. Deep in a bat-ridden cave, while she was searching for the living pearls of Mysotic, Alassra Shentrantra discovered that though she was human and vulnerable to death, she did not age as other humans did—could not age as they did.

With the pearls in her purse, Alassra returned to Rashemen, hoping to learn more about her origins. But the witches who had raised her were dead, their successors ignorant, and the Vremyonni seers trembled when she approached them in the Running Rocks. Never one to bear frustration lightly, even in her youth, Alassra took her curiosity to the Outer Planes, visiting places that no human before her had seen, much less survived. She gathered spells like apples. She became a master of magic, but she learned nothing about herself.

Over the next four and a half centuries, the unaging Alassra Shentrantra lived three-score lives, most as a human woman, but sometimes as a man and sometimes within another race's skin. On occasion, she lived in obscurity, but many of her disguised lives are remembered in song and legend. By her own accounts, given to the monks here at Candlekeep during her rare visits, she enjoyed her notoriety and was pleased by the number and quality of her enemies. Beneath her disguise, she'd lost much of her humanity, replacing it with the dross of learning and magic.

We foresaw a loneliness that would consume her and guessed that her lonely spirit would welcome oblivion when it arrived.

Then, when we and she least expected it, the Sixth-of-the-Seven fell in love. Not for the first time, of course. Alassra took and discarded lovers in all of her disguises, but it was different when Lailomun Zerad strode into her life.

Lailomun was a mage, a candle mage compared to Alassra's firestorm. But it was danger, not magic that held them together and led Alassra Shentrantra to reveal herself for the first time, and completely, to another. Now Zerad was an initiate of a magic school that forbade association, intimate or otherwise, with free-lance wizards such as Alassra Shentrantra. More specifically, Zerad's mentor was a woman who tolerated no rivals, intimate or otherwise. She owned her students outright and would sooner have destroyed a man than surrender him to another.

The scent of danger surrounded them both during the two years they trysted in secret. Then, Lailomun's deceit was uncovered.

The next time Alassra arrived at their bolt-hole, she found a rose-thorn branch waiting on her lover's pillow. She grieved—of that there is no doubt—but her grief was less than her need for vengeance. Alassra was not yet Chosen; she is the Sixth of the Seven, but she is the first with spellcraft. Beyond doubt, she could have crushed Lailomun's mentor. With a little care and planning, her spells could have destroyed his homeland. And, at that time, her conscience would have raised no objections to the loss of innocent lives. The time had come for Alassra Shentrantra to learn that her conscience had never belonged to her. The Seven had been marked before birth by the goddess Mystra. Their immortality and their consciences belonged to her.

Mystra confronted Alassra in the planes where she gathered the reagents for her most cataclysmic spells. The confrontation lasted a month and in the end, the goddess prevailed. Alassra left the planes as one of the Chosen. She was as wroth as she'd been when she found the rose-thorn branch, but many times wiser.

Not long after that fateful encounter in the planes, Alassra Shentrantra arrived in Aglarond, southwest of Rashemen, due west of Thay where dwell the Red Wizards, longtime enemies of Alassra's one-time guardians and—not at all

coincidentally—home to Lailomun's mentor. Without revealing her name—any of her names—the Sixth-of-the-Seven offered herself as an apprentice to Ilione, sister of Halacar, King of Aglarond at that time, though Ilione knew no magic that Alassra hadn't known for at least a century.

As the years passed, Alassra buried her love for Lailomun and raised it up again in the simple folk of Aglarond. The vengeance Mystra had forbidden became the just defense of her new homeland. Time and time again, Alassra directed her fury into the land of Thay and against the corrupt Red Wizards who rule there. At Ilione's suggestion, King Halacar dubbed the nameless apprentice, the Simbul, a meaningless title, so far as I have been able to determine, but one well-respected in Aglarond where it became synonymous with a tall, silver-haired woman, with lightning eyes and a temper to match.

Emboldened by his sister's fierce apprentice, King Halacar launched Aglarond's small army against the Red Wizards, but, for all her magic, the Simbul was not yet a warrior and certainly not a competent army commander. The Aglarondans barely avoided a rout. The people lost faith in their king; the king lost faith in his sister and the Simbul. For a year the very air of Aglarond was rank with anarchy and treason, until the king died, poisoned, it was said, and probably by Thayan hands—though no one looked hard for the culprits.

Ilione succeeded her brother on Aglarond's Verdigris Throne. She restored order and righteousness throughout her kingdom, as is recorded in many other chronicles. She built Aglarond's first navy and rebuilt its army, but kept it home. Throughout Ilione's sixty-year reign, her apprentice, the Simbul, oversaw Aglarond's borders and—sometimes with the army's aid but more often alone—kept them secure from Thayan incursion.

Before she died, Queen Ilione named the Simbul as her heir. By then, of course, the Aglarondans knew the Simbul was no

ordinary human woman, no ordinary wizard. No noble family nor merchant faction was foolish enough to object to the Simbul's coronation in the Year of the Watching Cold.

For seven years now, Alassra Shentrantra has ruled as the Simbul. She is at best respected, more generally feared, and only rarely loved by those around her. She keeps the Red Wizards out of Aglarond, and for that she commands her realm's undivided loyalty.

Notes for an examination,
Written by Mehgrin, apprentice at Candlekeep,
placed, by accident, in Cirian's Concise History
and filed with it

(The day was very dreary, and the headache very bad)

Zandilar: a goddess, maybe, called into being in the Yuirwood a long time ago by humans who lived in crude lakeside huts and hunted with stone-tipped spears. The only depictions of her from that time show her either naked and dancing or running with animals—usually horses—while hunters throw spears. (Does this mean that there were two Zandilars?)

When the Tel'Quessir came to Faerun, a tribe of the Sy-Tel'Quessir took the Yuirwood for their own. They were stronger and smarter than the humans; they had their own gods, who were stronger and smarter than gods like Zandilar. The humans disappeared from the Yuirwood after the Sy-Tel'Quessir arrived, but their Seldarine gods absorbed Zandilar and the other old human gods instead of driving them out.

According to the Sy-Tel'Quessir, there was only one Zandilar and she was always dancing. They knew her as the goddess of physical passion and romance, and when they depicted her, they depicted her with a cat, not a horse, because cats are like that. Probably she was a popular goddess, but not an important one, and the other Tel'Quessir never adopted her or any of the other gods the Sy-Tel'Quessir worshiped in the Yuirwood.

Once the Sy-Tel'Quessir were in the Yuirwood, nothing changed, for a very long time. Then the Yuirwood Sy-Tel'Quessir got careless and got tangled in wars with goblin-kind and the drow. They drew their gods into the wars with them, and even though they won the wars and kept the Yuirwood, they lost, too, because they and their gods had done bad things in order to win.

So the Sy-Tel'Quessir of the Yuirwood began to forget things. They began to die. When humans came back to the Yuirwood, there weren't many Yuir elves left, and they'd forgotten most everything that had ever been important to them, including their gods. Other elves remembered the Seldarine, but only the Yuir elves had ever known about Zandilar, Relkath, Magnar and the other old human gods.

Now, no one knows anything about Zandilar. The Candlekeep mentors say she's missing or that she's become a part of the forest. But they don't know. No one knows what's happened to her, why she vanished, or whether she could come back.

I think she could come back, if the Cha'Tel'Quessir who live in the Yuirwood now wanted her and the other old gods, but maybe they shouldn't try too hard. Maybe Zandilar's been gone too long. Maybe she wouldn't be a goddess of passion and romance when she came back.

1

The village of Sulalk, in Aglarond
Eight days after Greengrass, The Year of the Staff (1366DR)

It was a warm spring morning. Trees were cloaked in flowers. The grass had greened with the promise of rich forage for the mothers of the lambs, calves, and colts born each night in farmyard birthing sheds.

Bro wanted to stretch out on the ground and nap until noon. No matter how beautiful the days, it was the nature of babies to be born at night, and it was the duty of farmers and farmer's stepsons to sit in the birthing shed. Bro had been vigilant for six nights' running, through a steady

stream of births, all but one of which had been successful.

A good spring, so far, with good trade even for the stillborn lamb whose tender hide would make a fine pair of gloves for some lady in the royal city, Velprintalar. Dyed and embellished with jewels and silks, the lamb's hide might find its way onto the queen's hands, though thoughts of Aglarond's mighty Simbul fled Bro's mind as fast as they occurred. In Sulalk, on the Yuirwood's verge, Aglarond's seacoast capital was a world, not a week, away.

Adentir, Bro's human stepfather, paid the queen's tithes and abided by her laws, which were, fortunately, rooted in common sense and easily obeyed. Dent raised a glass in the queen's name at festival times and never mentioned her otherwise. For Bro, who'd lived his first twelve years among his own kind, the Cha'Tel'Quessir half-elves of the Yuirwood, the Simbul was the living emblem of an uneasy truce between them and the world outside—the world in which Bro had lived since his father's death.

A hand touched Bro's shoulder. With it came the scents of pine bark and moss that were Shali, his mother, and the Yuirwood. But the forest was memory and the bowl she offered was filled with whey-soaked grain.

"Hungry, Ember?"

She called him by his boyhood name. Everyone else called him Bro, a crude shortening of Ebroin because, deep in their guts, humans remained averse to Cha'Tel'Quessir names and, in his own soul, Bro knew he hadn't yet made Ebroin his own true name.

More tired than hungry, Bro set aside the collection of half-braided thongs that would, when he was clearheaded, become a halter for a newborn foal. He accepted the bowl.

"Maybe tonight." Shali ran a hand through his hair, leaving his ears exposed to the sunlight.

"Maybe." Bro tossed his head, returning his hair to its customary ears-and-face-hiding disorder.

He watched his mother flinch and felt shame. Half-elves

weren't a race like their elf or human forebearers. First-generation half-elves took after their elven and human parents equally, but among the Cha'Tel'Quessir, family resemblance was a chancy thing. It wasn't Shali's fault that her skin was human-fair and her ears were small and rounded while he was forest-shadowed to the tips of his very elven ears. No more than it had been her fault that Rizcarn had broken his neck falling out of a tree he'd climbed a thousand times. Shali had loved Rizcarn in a way Bro couldn't begin to imagine; she'd left the Yuirwood because she couldn't bear her memories and couldn't die, either—because she had a son she'd had to finish raising.

In the five years since Rizcarn's death, Shali had become a stranger dressed in layers of woven cloth, a kerchief bound over hair and ears alike. She'd never go back to the trees; they both knew that, just as they both knew he would. The knowledge ached between them.

"Adentir says the foal will be yours, if it's a colt." Shali gave a brittle laugh. The Cha'Tel'Quessir weren't horse-folk. A colt wouldn't keep Bro out of the Yuirwood.

"I'll hold him to his word," Bro replied.

She smiled a thin-lipped half-smile, the only smile Bro saw anymore.

"He's not bad," Bro said awkwardly, speaking words that were, and were not, the truth.

Adentir was human. Everyone in Sulalk was human, except for Bro and Shali. Even Tay-Fay, his half-sister, was human. That was the way of things for the Cha'Tel'Quessir: If a half-elf mated with an elf or human, their children belonged to the full-blooded world. The Cha'Tel'Quessir way of life could vanish in a generation.

Bro didn't blame his stepfather. Human ways were ideal for humans, elf ways were ideal for elves, but Cha'Tel'Quessir had to resist both, if they valued themselves.

"He's been good to me, Ember. He understands. Rizcarn—"

Bro gagged down another spoonful of the cold porridge. He

hated it when his mother talked about his father, expecting him to take Rizcarn's part. He'd loved his father, missed him and mourned him, but when push came to shove, he couldn't—didn't want to—replace Rizcarn.

"Dent says it'll take two years at least to train a colt," he muttered. "Says we'll do it together. Says he'll show me how it's done. He's got good hands—" he paused, leaving the words, for a human, unsaid.

"A tree doesn't grow until a seed's been planted, Ember. A lot can happen in two years." Shali tucked Bro's hair behind his ears again. "If it's a colt."

And if the mare foaled a filly, instead? Bro closed his eyes. A lot would happen in two years, no matter what happened after they led the mare into the birthing shed. In two years he'd be back in the Yuirwood; he couldn't—didn't want to—imagine being anywhere else.

"A pretty girl might catch your eye."

Bro flinched. Shame burned for a second time, then his anger flared: He'd never look at a human woman. Never. And Shali knew it. She looked at the sky; they were each alone and miserable.

"Momma! Momma! Bro!"

A child's voice broke the silence. Bro and Shali glanced toward the path where Tay-Fay ran as fast as four-year-old legs could carry her. She stumbled as she stopped and avoided a fall only by lunging for Bro's knees. The bowl speckled all three of them with cold porridge and laughter. Bro shook his head dramatically, then swung his sister into his lap.

"What's the matter, Little Leaf?"

Her true name was Taefaeli—Light-through-the-Leaves—a Cha'Tel'Quessir name: Adentir did understand, better than Rizcarn would have understood were the situation reversed. But Taefaeli knew nothing of the forest. She called herself Tay-Fay and hadn't yet noticed that she didn't look like her mother or brother.

Tay-Fay gasped for breath. "Poppa says come quick. To the shed. The momma-horse—"

Bro pushed his sister off with a kiss on the forehead. Tay-Fay whimpered as he stood and threatened worse until he picked her up. She was spoiled, human, and a thorough pest; no Cha'Tel'Quessir tree-family would have put up with her. She fought when he passed her to Shali.

"Later, Little Leaf. I'll take you to the bank above the stream. You can pick flowers, pinks for the mare, yellow-bud for the foal."

Her sniffles became a grin that Bro returned effortlessly. He couldn't explain the joy he felt when she smiled, but Tay-Fay was the reason he hadn't left Sulalk yet and the only reason he might still be here two years hence.

* * * * *

Adentir greeted Bro with a grunt and a gesture toward the straw sheaves heaped against the wall. With no other instruction, Bro hauled an armful into the shed. The mare ignored him until he got the straw spread, then she pawed it and tried to lie down.

"Hold her standing while I tie up her tail," Dent said. "Keep her calm. You know best."

Bro did. Five years ago, Dent would have held the mare while Bro did the chores; now Dent wrapped the mare's tail in a tattered length of cloth while Bro stroked her head. In the Yuirwood, the Cha'Tel'Quessir were hunters and, for their own sakes, they quenched the innate rapport they felt with wildlife. It was different on a farm—harder in some ways because, in the end, farmers were hunters, too. But before the end, farmers needed rapport with their animals.

"Good, Bro . . . good. Let her down now, if she's ready. Keep her calm. That's good, Bro."

They worked together well enough at times like this, and Dent was careful to praise his wife's son, which wasn't, in truth, something Rizcarn had done very often. And maybe that was the root of Bro's problems: It wasn't easy to be

around Dent without feeling disloyal to his father. The only way he could balance the guilt was with rudeness.

Not that guilt or rudeness mattered right then. The mare had foaled before. She tolerated men's hands because they'd always been on her. Straining, resting, then straining again she birthed her foal while Bro whispered gentleness in her ear.

"Got yourself a colt-foal, Bro," Dent exclaimed when the birth was well underway.

Bro and the mare sighed together, but there'd never been any doubt, not in Bro's mind.

When the mare was standing again, Bro joined his stepfather in the doorway. The mare whuffled her acceptance of this offspring, then, in the grip of nameless instinct, she licked the life into him.

"You're a man of property now, Bro," Dent said, a bit too casually, as the colt thrust a spindly leg forward, tested its strength and collapsed. "Time to start thinking of your future. Gudnor's widow-sister has come to keep house for him, now that his wife's gone. She's got two daughters, dowered by their dead father and both unspoken for. Be a good time for you to make yourself useful to Gudnor. I give you leave."

Bro ignored him; his future most emphatically did not include Gudnor's sisters, regardless of their dowries. The silence grew thick, until Dent cut it again.

"I've never seen that color before, all fog and twilight. Old Erom's stud-horse throws blacks and bays, regular as rain, but in all my days, Bro, I've never seen a twilight horse."

There was a challenge in Dent's words, for all they were soft-spoken. Unafraid, Bro met his stepfather's eyes. "I took her —" he admitted, an admission he'd made before and that had resulted in his one beating at Dent's hands. "I rode her to the Yuirwood and back again. We met no one, man or beast. If Erom's stud-horse didn't sire her foal, I don't know what did."

The words weren't lies, but they weren't true, either, and Dent was wise enough to ken the subtle differences.

"You're a man now, Bro. No good comes from the lies a man tells or the secrets he keeps from his kin."

You're not my kin! Those were the words battling for Bro's tongue. In the beginning, when Shali first came to Sulalk to keep house for another man, Bro had thought Adentir was a lack-wit. He knew better now: Dent was a simple man, simple in the way that good, honest men were often simple, simple in a way no son of Rizcarn Golden-Moss could imitate or defeat.

With the sounds of the mare and foal behind him, Bro saw his stepfather as his mother saw him: as different from Rizcarn as night was from day.

Probably, Dent would understand. Probably, Dent would light his pipe and listen to anything Bro might say about his father. For all their disdain, villagers were insatiably curious about the Yuirwood and the Cha'Tel'Quessir. Possibly, with a pinch of effort, Bro could have reconciled himself to his mother's second husband, to Sulalk and farming, to the pure humanity that lay generations deep in his heritage.

But because reconciliation might have been possible, Bro maintained an arrogance that masked, however inadequately, both loneliness and fear. He strode away from the shed, from his stepfather and the twilight colt.

"Will you be back?" Dent called after him. "What do I tell your mother?"

Bro hunched his shoulders and kept walking. He'd be back; for two more years he'd be back, training his colt. Then he'd be in the Yuirwood where, if he were lucky, he'd never see the naked sky again.

He'd been back just once, when he stole the mare. Driven by a persistent dream in which he'd seen the trees and heard his father's voice, Bro had ridden her to the forest edge, just as he'd confessed. He'd arrived at twilight, beneath a full moon. A deep-wood wind blew from the trees. A sign, he'd

thought: an invitation to put farms and human farmers behind him. He pointed the mare into the Yuirwood, felt the dappled moonlight on his skin—or imagined he could. Come morning, though, he was back in the meadow beside a flock of sheep.

The Yuirwood had rejected him.

With no one to watch or care, Bro had crumpled into the dewy grass. He'd wept himself sick: his dream had been mere delusion or, worse, deliberate deception; he could hear his father's laughter in the morning breeze.

Bro had ridden the mare back to Sulalk. Where else could he go if the forest wouldn't have him? He'd admitted his folly and taken his punishment: four strokes for thievery, another three for deceit. He'd tried to hate the man wielding the short whip, but there were tears in Dent's eyes.

Winter had been cold and dreamless but lately, as the birthing season approached, Bro had begun to dream again. He'd seen the mare's foal, a twilight colt of the Yuirwood.

When the birthing shed and Dent's hurt-puzzled face were behind him, Bro settled against one of the great trees that still grew here and there in the farmland, sentries of the vanished Yuirwood. He closed his eyes and opened his thoughts to Relkath Many-Branched, as Rizcarn had taught him to do.

Relkath was Lord of Trees, Godhead of the Yuirwood and buried so deep in time and memory that listening for his voice was like listening for the splash of a single raindrop during a summer storm.

If no one listens, Rizcarn had said, why should Relkath Many-Limbed ever talk to us again? If enough of the Cha'Tel'Quessir listen—truly listen—he'll hear our faith.

Bro remembered his father's words better than he remembered his voice or his face. He could summon Rizcarn's particulars: his deep, mottled, copper-green skin, raven hair, even darker eyes, and flashing, ivory teeth. His laughter, always faintly mocking, even at the last, when

Rizcarn had balanced on the tree limb, chiding everyone for clumsiness a moment before he slipped and crashed headfirst onto the hard ground.

Bro could see that image—his father, facedown, limp, lifeless and odd-angled—but try as he might, Bro couldn't fit the living pieces together.

When Shali first brought him to Sulalk, Bro had come to this tree to grieve. He'd grown too old for tears. Today, as it had been for at least two years, he was simply numb and empty, thinking nothing, until there were voices and laughter coming along the path. Bro recognized one of the voices: Varnnet, a farmer's son a few years older than him; the other voice belonged to a stranger, a woman, one of Gudnor's eligible nieces.

Bro made himself small in the tree's shadow. He'd tangled with Varnnet a few times and never come out the victor. It would be worse if Varnnet thought there was a woman at stake. Bro told anyone who asked that the Sulalk women didn't stir him in the least, but that was another lie. His heart leapt to the sound of a woman's laughter, the sway of her skirt as she walked past.

"You're growing up, Ember," Shali had said when he first confessed his wayward thoughts. "Soon the girls will notice you and you'll be breaking hearts until you fall in love yourself. I'll lose my son to another woman!"

Her conclusions frightened Bro as few things frightened him: he'd become a stranger in his own body and his mother laughed! It was better now, or he'd grown more accustomed to the way his idle thoughts slewed. Bro drew his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around his ankles as the merrymaking voices came closer.

Walk on by, he thought, squeezing his eyes shut, as if his thoughts were wishes. I'm ignoring you, not looking at you at all, there's no reason for you to see me. Why did I come to this tree? It's too close to the path to Gudnor's farm.

As Bro's luck would have it, they stopped on the tree's other

side. The woman's light, musical voice was enough to drive Bro mad, especially when he felt the fringes of her skirt brush lightly against his arm. Varnnet, surely, was standing nearby, fists cocked, waiting to pound a luckless Cha'Tel'Quessir rival. Bro gritted his teeth till his jaw ached. His pulse was loud enough to drown out the laughter.

"Zandilar!"

That was her voice, her name, her breath on the back of Bro's neck, teasing him while Varnnet flexed his muscles. Desperate, Bro flailed an arm, expecting disaster, finding only air beside him.

"Leave me alone! Gods curse on you—"

He opened his eyes. There was no one nearby: no dancing girl, no bully waiting with his fists. The humans had passed. The laughter—Bro still heard laughter—came from elsewhere.

"Zandilar!"

The name reminded him of the Yuirwood and nights with his father, but he couldn't place it precisely.

"Fine, young man, come dance with me!"

Locks of Bro's hair twisted on his neck and a touch soft as feathers, warm as life, caressed his arm. Bro clutched the cuff of his boot before he sprang to his feet. There was a knife—a dark-steel Cha'Tel'Quessir knife—in his hand when he stood, wary of an enemy he could feel, but not see.

"Fine, silly, young man! Come dance with Zandilar!"

He saw her then, hovering above the grass: a slender apparition in silver and gold. Cloaked in dazzling light, the apparition had no sex nor race, but her laugh was feminine, as was her manner. She sat astride a twilight horse whose black legs disappeared in its shadow.

A golden arm stretched out to trace the angle of his cheek; Bro's knees weakened. He staggered backward into the tree, dropping his knife as well. Her laughter shook the tree. Leaves brushed Bro's face as they floated down.

"Come dance with Zandilar in the Yuirwood, fine young man.

Come when you're ready. I'll wait for you in the Sunglade!" Zandilar spoke the Cha'Tel'Quessir dialect with a lilting accent as if ordinary words were a magical melody. When she wheeled the twilight stallion and galloped south, toward the Yuirwood, Bro yearned to follow her, but after three strides, they simply vanished.

"Sunglade," Bro whispered Zandilar's parting word. He'd never visited the Sunglade, but Rizcarn had spoken of it in reverent tones: the oldest stone circle in the Yuirwood, older than the Cha'Tel'Quessir, built by the Yuir, the wild and full-blooded Sy-Tel'Quessir from whom Bro and all his scattered kin claimed descent.

The youth's pulse quieted. His hand was steady when he slipped the fallen knife into the boot sheath. There was no more reason to be frightened. He'd fallen in love, just as Shali predicted, and he'd dance with Zandilar when the twilight colt could carry him to the Sunglade—in two years, just as he'd planned. With Zandilar shimmering in his memory, no human girl would tempt him to break faith with the Cha'Tel'Quessir. With Zandilar waiting in the Sunglade, the next two years would be tortuously slow, but when they'd passed, he and the twilight colt, Zandilar's Dancer—the name appeared suddenly in Bro's mind—would be ready.

* * * * *

Hours past midnight, in a distant part of Faerun—in Shadowdale, to be precise—in the privy chambers of the mage, Elminster, to be absolutely accurate—a silver-haired woman sat bolt-upright in bed.

"Zandilar?" she muttered, cross-grained and clutching a corner of the mage's linen. "Zandilar's dancer?"

Nearby, the great mage tidied his abundant beard. "What disturbs you, Alassra?" He laid a gently restraining hand on her forearm, deterring her from the shape-shifting magic that was her reflex response to unmeasured danger.

"Zandilar. The name came to me in a dream from Aglarond." No surprise there. These days, Alassra Shentrantra, Chosen

of Mystra, was better known as the Simbul, the storm queen of Aglarond, and she took her ruling responsibilities seriously. Little in Aglarond passed beneath her knowledge. If Zandilar had penetrated Alassra's rest here in Shadowdale, then Zandilar was important. Elminster racked his prodigious memory for answers to questions that would almost certainly be asked.

"A god, I think," Alassra muttered.

"A goddess, Zandilar the Dancer," the Old Mage corrected.

"Once of the Sy-Tel'Quessir in the Yuirwood."

The silver hair shimmered as Alassra nodded. "There's a stone in the Sunglade that bears her name—one of the smaller stones within the elven Seldarine circle."

Elminster made a light and, in the chamber's northern corner, a brazier came to life beneath a ceramic pot kept filled with water. "You're aware of the rumor that some of the Cha'Tel'Quessir seek to arouse the powers of their distant ancestors?"

Alassra rose from the bed with the singular grace possessed by all seven daughters of Dornal and Elue Shundar. She clothed herself in a gown of plain-woven linen and knelt beside the brazier.

"Of course I'm aware of rumors," she said, her voice sharp, and a reminder, even to Elminster, that the epithet "storm queen" was well deserved. "The Cha'Tel'Quessir have talked about their ancestors as long as humans have grouched in the Fang. Discontent is foremost in the Aglarondan nature. That's why I rule there. I don't fear it."

Boiling water rattled the pot's lid. Unmindful of the steam, Alassra stuffed crumpled leaves into a silver-lace basket, then shoved the basket into still-bubbling water. Elminster sat in silence, waiting for the tea's fragrance to calm his beloved friend.

A few moments later, Alassra sipped tea hot enough to scald and sank into a cushioned chair. "Your warning was well-meant. I will see if the Cha'Tel'Quessir malcontents are

attached to Zandilar the Dancer. Yet, I tell you, what was said to me was not Zandilar the Dancer, but Zandilar's Dancer and the image, unmistakably, was that of a horse, a foal, in fact, and scarcely a day old."

"Rashemen, perhaps?" Elminster suggested. Alassra had grown up among the Rashemaar witches. Centuries had not dulled the bonds between the horse folk and their adopted daughter. "Surely they would warn you if their seers had scryed something ominous."

But Alassra shook her head before Elminster could pursue his thought further.

"This was an announcement, not a warning. And the messenger was a Cha'Tel'Quessir youth, not quite grown." She wrinkled her brow. "His mother calls him Ember. He means to dance with her, with Zandilar—or the horse." She smiled and shook her head. "He's young still; his thoughts shift before they're complete."

Elminster stifled his own smile, remembering a time when he was younger and the ever-shifting thoughts of Elue Shundar's daughters confounded every mage in Faerun.

Again, Alassra interrupted Elminster's thoughts. "It is odd, isn't it, El—to combine horses and the Yuirwood powers in a single thought? A forest is hardly the place where I'd look for horses."

"Nowadays," Elminster agreed, reaching into one of his robe's many pockets and drawing out the briar-thorn pipe that nestled there. Sparks flew and scents as delicate as Alassra's tea mingled in the air. "There was a time, though .. . Faerun was a colder, wetter place, stamped with great trees the likes of which—well, a few remain in the groves around your sister's Silverymoon, but of what remains of that primal forest, most of it is in your beloved Aglarond, deep in the Yuirwood."

Alassra arched an eyebrow many shades darker than her hair. "And horses? I suppose you're going to tell me that herds of horses ran freely in this primal forest."

"As freely as any creature that size can run between the trees. As freely, at least, as a great hart."

"And herds, El—were there herds of forest horses in the time before you and I?"

Elminster shrugged, knowing that Alassra was baiting him.

"Small herds, I should think. Narrow, certainly. Easier to fit between the trees and the hunters."

"Oh—hunters? Bears, wolves and panthers, or creatures more exotic?"

"Men, Alassra," the bearded mage said, growing suddenly serious. "There were men in Faerun's forest."

"And women?"

She'd missed his change in tone, a rare mistake and a certain sign that the midnight image disturbed her more than she wished to admit.

"Men and women, yes. Living their lives, worshiping their gods—none of whom are remembered."

Alassra poured herself another cup of tea. "Except by you?" She'd sensed the change now, but resisted it. Her baiting turned brittle, bitter.

"I know nothing about them, dear friend, except that they—the hunters and their gods—existed in that part of the primal Faerun forest that the Yuir elves would eventually claim for themselves. There those elves would erect two stone circles, one inside the other, one inscribed with Seldarine names and the other with names that are, as you, yourself said, at best, half-forgotten."

"The Cha'Tel'Quessir? Say it outright, El: There are Cha'Tel'Quessir who've never reconciled to human rule in Aglarond. They wish to see every human man, woman, and child put in boats and sailed toward the sunset. They'd like to raise the ancient Yuir powers toward that aim, but they won't act on their wish, not while the zulkirs and tharchions of Thay lick their chops just across Aglarond's border."

"If they've only got one wish, Alassra. I doubt that they do. Oh, maybe some of them, the Cha'Tel'Quessir are no more

immune to short sight than the rest of us . . ."

Alassra scowled. Her eyes began to glow with sapphire light. Elminster ignored the warning. In all of Faerun, but especially in his privy chambers, he was the best equipped to weather the storm queen's tantrums.

"But the Cha'Tel'Quessir aren't like any other race—"

"They aren't a race! They're half-elves!"

"Precisely, but tell that to them. Nowhere in Faerun, nowhere on all Toril, is there a place where half-elves look at both their children and their parents and see folk like themselves. Nowhere . . . except in the Yuirwood."

The deep blue fire faded from Alassra's eyes. "My mother," she whispered. Elue Shundar had been a half-elf, the child of an elf and human pairing. Alassra and her sisters, of course, took after their human father. "She never saw herself in the ones she loved."

Elminster set down his pipe. In his determination to enlighten his friend, he'd forgotten Elue Shundar, who'd faced the very fate the Cha'Tel'Quessir sought to avoid. He stood behind Alassra's chair, gently kneading her shoulders, offering solace without looking at her troubled face.

Many long moments later, Alassra began to speak softly. "The Cha'Tel'Quessir are looking beyond the Seldarine, back to that primal forest, for gods that they can make them their own." She sighed; the tension drained from her. "Can they? Can Zandilar the Dancer be a horse-hunter's goddess?"

"Someone thinks so," Elminster replied, returning to his chair and his pipe. "Your Ember, maybe. Maybe Zandilar herself. Not the horse, I should think, but Zandilar's Dancer bears close watching. Let me know what you learn. My books are ever at your disposal, my memory and my company as well."

"I mean to take advantage of all three."

"Good . . . Excellent. Now, breakfast, dear friend, or back to bed?"

The royal city of Velprintalar, in Aglarond
The thirteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner
(1368DR)

Alassra Shentrantra, the queen of Aglarond surveyed her royal city and its busy harbor from an open window in the uppermost room of the highest tower of her copper-green palace. Morning light on her silver hair lent it a blonde, mortal hue. Her eyes, like the room behind her, were hidden in shadows dark as midnight.

The kingdom had prospered during Alassra's rule. Her window overlooked a harbor where trade ships waited at anchor for a chance to tie up at sturdy wharves. She could hear the occasional voice raised in warning or argument as dock crews and ship crews hurried their work.

There was a storm driving across the Inner Sea. Charcoal clouds already masked the northwestern horizon. Alassra leaned over the sill and drew the changing wind deep into her lungs. With senses honed more by experience than magic, she measured the storm, judging it natural, not wizard, weather. A few shingles might blow loose and a carelessly tied boat might drift free before the storm played itself out, but overall it posed no threat to the city and failed to hold her attention.

Alassra filled her lungs a second time, a great, yawning breath with outstretched arms, then she turned her back on the open window. A breeze, tangy with salt, followed Aglarond's queen into the shadows. It ruffled the parchment and feathers scattered atop a narrow worktable. Another woman at another window might have spared a thought for the rainy gusts that would follow the breeze, but not Alassra Shentrantra. Breezes entered because she willed them to; when the storm arrived, it would be forbidden.

Although she'd judged the coming storm a natural event, Alassra took no chances. A handful of this, a pinch of that, gathered quickly, ground in a clear crystal mortar and triggered with a single, soft-spoken word, boosted Alassra's

already uncanny sensitivity to things magical. She closed her eyes and deliberately ignored each lingering spell or potent artifact within the walls. Her mind grew quiet until there was only Mystra's magic pulsing through her veins with each beat of her heart. For an instant there was something else, a glancing touch of curiosity, too gentle, she thought, to emanate from Thay.

She immediately sent a thought after it. Nothing should penetrate her wards without her consent. Her thought came back empty. Whatever had touched her, if anything had, it had escaped.

She opened her eyes with an uneasy sigh. The reckless part of her spirit counselled pursuit, to the outermost planes, if necessary: Her enemies were legion; no breach of privacy could be overlooked. But the reckless part of her spirit was smaller than it had been before she became queen. She had Aglarond to look after and confidence in her wards. Her enemies, especially the Red Wizards of Thay, weren't renowned for their subtlety.

They were, however, known for their persistence and, acknowledging that, the place of honor in the chamber belonged not to the Simbul's eclectic library nor to the marble-topped worktable where she pursued her endless curiosity regarding all things magical, but a crystal dome as broad as her outstretched arms, half as high, and floating on a shallow, quicksilver pool. Although every Faerunian wizard worth his or her spellbook possessed a scrying artifact, the Simbul's mirror was the envy of those who knew it existed.

The mirror was exquisitely attuned to Alassra's thoughts. Before her mind had fully framed a question, the quicksilver began to move, defying nature to slide upward, over the flawless crystal.

East, to Thay, Aglarond's queen thought as the last thumbnail patch of crystal disappeared.

Quicksilver dulled and darkened to steel gray, punctuated by rusty blooms, large and small, each corresponding to a

Thayan enemy. In the five years since she had completed the spellcraft controlling her mirror, Alassra had learned how to interpret the bloodstain blotches. It had been worth the effort. For most of those years, Thay had been under a pall as dense as the magical fog that shrouded Aglarond's Yuirwood. The mirror had been the Simbul's most reliable source of information about the Red Wizards—other than the men and women who risked their lives spying in Thay on her behalf.

The zulkirs, she thought, refining her interrogation. The lesser splotches began to fade.

Szass Tam—

One blotch swelled larger than the others. It didn't sharpen into the zulkir's features. The Simbul could pierce Thayan wards, but not without provoking an all-out war. The rusty stain grew more complex: a seething sprawl of angry colors covering half the dome. By its shape and position—and the constant corroboration of the spies she ran within Thay—Alassra knew that the Zulkir of Necromancy still licked his wounds in the aftermath of a spectacular failure to ensnare the fiend, Eltab, in the Year of the Shield. That failure was somehow related to lifting the pall over Thay and, since it had had such far-reaching magical effects, was almost certainly causing chaos among the always-contentious Red Wizards.

Of all her enemies, Szass Tam had been the most dangerous, and would be again when he resumed his place as first among the eight theoretically equal zulkirs of Thay. Unless one of the other seven, through accident or alliance, accomplished what Alassra herself had not: the destruction of the no-longer-human, no-longer-mortal, lich.

With that thought in mind, Alassra shaped another zulkir's name: Mythrell'aa.

Szass Tam was a cunning creature with ambitions that reached far beyond necromancy and Thay; he and Alassra were bound to be enemies. Mythrell'aa, in contrast, had no

grand ambitions. Alassra could have overlooked her, as she overlooked countless others of evil disposition, so long as their paths did not directly cross. But now Alassra's enmity knew no limit: Mythrell'aa, Zulkir of Illusion, had been Lailomun's mentor.

The rose-thorn branch, sealed in glass and laid in state on a nearby shelf, was Mythrell'aa's doing. Alassra's eyes widened when thoughts of Mythrell'aa roiled her mind. Her fingers twitched toward the slow-moving coils on the quicksilver surface of her mirror, as if by seizing them she could seize Mythrell'aa as well and wring the life from her as Mythrell'aa had wrung it from Lailomun.

When her thoughts were calmer, Alassra invoked other zulkirs: Aznar Thrul of Invocation—the mirror marked him with an ebony spider web—and the conjuror Nevron, a weeping smear who blamed himself for his misfortunes because he lacked the courage to blame Szass Tam or his ally, Aznar Thrul. There were other names, too, each with an abstract, sometimes beautiful, always revealing quicksilver signature, but Alassra's mirror wasn't treasured because it could track her known enemies. Its true worth lay in its unique ability to capture and reflect the unsuspected. Focused in Aglarond, the quicksilver shimmered gently with guilty fears and desperate pleas for royal intervention or justice. Focused on Thay, the crystal dome fairly bubbled with grudges and curses.

A lesser person might have been daunted by the sheer mass of enmity. Alassra simply sorted through the Thayan onslaught, weaving her hands over the roiled quicksilver until she was convinced that the mirror reflected nothing new or significantly different. Then, as was her custom in these interrogations, she let her mind grow blank and asked —

What else?

The image of a bird in flight swept across the quicksilver. Like the fleeting touch she'd felt as she approached the

mirror, Alassra couldn't capture its meaning before it vanished. Failure brought a grimace to her face, but, given the danger-laced life she chose to live, two inexplicable incidents in a single day—even a single hour—weren't at all uncommon.

For several moments after the bird flew past, the mirror reflected her own face, nothing more. It was summertime, hot and lazy in Aglarond and Thay alike. She wasn't surprised that nothing conspiratorial or otherwise was brewing in Thay. She ended the interrogation with the ritual question—

Show me Enchantment.

Waves rippled the quicksilver. When they cleared, a familiar face met her eyes: Lauzoril. Zulkir of Enchantment, the only Thayan face her mirror ever revealed.

She'd never met Lauzoril in person. For years, until the Thayan pall lifted, she'd known the Zulkir of Enchantment only by his mirror-signature: a green flame that flickered whenever she inquired who in Thay had been thinking ill thoughts about her. She'd slain no few of his minions and he'd slain a few of hers. Whenever she'd thought about the mage behind the signature she'd imagined a sour, ugly and ancient creature hiding within layers of magical deception, which was true enough for the zulkirs she had met face to face, but not for Lauzoril.

He was young for a zulkir. Whatever else Alassra thought about the Red Wizards—and little of it was complimentary—she conceded that they trained their students thoroughly. It was a rare novice who donned a red robe before the age of twenty-five, after which there were usually several decades of grueling apprenticeship—such as Lailomun had been serving when she met him—before the wizard could start climbing through the treacherous hierarchy.

It was generally safe to assume that all the zulkirs had to be older than they claimed to be: it should take more than a lifetime to murder one's way to the pinnacles of Thayan

power. But Lauzoril revealed none of the signs of life-enhancing spellcraft. He appeared to be a man a few years short of his fiftieth birthday—an adolescent as Alassra measured lives. Remarkably, he'd been Zulkir of Enchantment for fifteen years. He was handsome, with frost-streaked blonde hair and rugged-rogue features as befitted a ruling enchanter, but enchantments had no effect on Alassra Shentrantra. It seemed quite likely that the face on the quicksilver surface was the zulkir's face as nature had shaped it.

Most Red Wizards shaved themselves hairless and covered their flesh with intricate tattoos. Lauzoril would not have been half so attractive among his tradition-conscious peers as he was to Aglarond's queen.

Which, in itself, raised intriguing questions:

Did Lauzoril know about the Simbul's mirror? Did he know that she spied on him? The glint in his cold green eyes, staring straight at her, and the smile crinkling the corners of his mouth seemed to say that he knew and that he enjoyed the experience. But, suspicions notwithstanding, Alassra's considerable research since his face first appeared, said no, the Zulkir of Enchantment was simply a man who smiled frequently and inscrutably as he went about his business.

One day she'd interrogate her mirror and there'd be no green-eyed man grinning back at her. After fifteen years, Enchantment was overdue for a new zulkir. It had happened before; save for the necromancer Szass Tam, zulkirs came and went frequently in Thay—and the very last thing Aglarond needed was another Szass Tam.

She told herself Faerun would be a better place when Lauzoril was gone; she told herself a lie.

Time was—before Lailomun and Aglarond—when those eyes would have drawn Alassra Shentrantra like a magnet. For centuries, rogues had been her favorite companions. Her past was pleasantly littered with memories of men who took advantage of every opportunity that crossed—or simply

neared—their twisted paths. Those had been the days—and nights—of fine adventuring.

If he'd been around two hundred years ago, she and Lauzoril might not be enemies. At least, they wouldn't have begun as enemies.

But the year was 1368, not 1168, and the Simbul ruled in Aglarond because Aglarond's enemies had become her enemies, without question or respite. Alassra banished the zulkir's reflection with a casual gesture. She had other curiosities to sate, other enemies to spy upon.

Their signatures should have appeared on the dome's surface, but the quicksilver cast her own face back, nothing more.

She pursed her lips. "A wry jest," Alassra muttered, though the mirror lacked all sentience. It was not the first time she'd seen her own reflection. "I've always been my own worst enemy." She raised her hand a second time, then paused.

Alassra was a proud woman, but not a vain one. Her reflected face, with its prominent bones and piercing blue eyes, inspired respect, not affection. The men who'd called her beautiful felt the same way about a storm-whipped ocean. Not the sort of face that appealed to the romantic temperament of an enchanter. Not the face she'd wear, if she'd ever intended to attract one.

As a shapeshifter, the queen of Aglarond acknowledged no peer. She could transform herself into any living creature and assume inanimate shapes besides. She could become whatever her audience expected to see. No beauty or monstrosity was beyond her, nothing at all—except a glimpse of her face as nature had intended it.

"After six hundred and two years," Alassra complained aloud. "What would I look like? What should I look like?"

The quicksilver reflection blurred, reformed, and blurred again. She snapped her fingers and the liquid metal drained into the pool below the dome. Naked crystal reflected a familiar, but not accurate, image.

"It's because it is today and because today's my birthday," she groused as she spun on her heel. Other mages kept familiars or companions for company, Alassra Shentrantra took the high road of solitude and wound up talking to herself. "Any other day and this wouldn't be a problem ... I wouldn't be thinking of rogues or wondering what my own face looks like these days . . . Damn you, Elminster!" She shook a fist in Shadowdale's general direction.

The Old Mage knew what day it was. He'd sent her a priceless gift: a pair of Mulhorandi scrolls, each more than three thousand years old. and she was properly grateful, but nowhere near as grateful as she would have been if he'd given her the gift she wanted: his presence, in the next room where the silk-covered bed waited.

A gust of wind scattered parchment and powder. The storm had arrived, and it had nothing to do with the charcoal clouds hanging over Velprintalar's harbor.

"A child, El. Is that so much?"

Alassra's mouth was still open when she shook her head with dismay. Of course it was a lot to ask of any man, to stand paternity for her child. It was, all things considered, a lot to ask of any child, especially if that child inherited anything of her temperament... or Elminster's.

"Mystra," Alassra whispered softly, but, she didn't need a goddess to tell her why she wanted a child. "Is it so wrong to want to see myself reflected in my child's eyes? Is it so wrong to want to see the world again the way it was when I was a child?"

Apparently, it was. Elminster, whose affection and good opinion Alassra valued above all else and whose other qualifications were superb, refused her request to come to Velprintalar. They gamboled in Shadowdale, Evermeet, and another score of places but not once, since she'd broached the subject last year, in Velprintalar.

"I told you what I wanted because I didn't want to trick you. I won't hold you responsible!" she shouted—at absent

Elminster, not Mystra, though she absolved the goddess, too.

Mystra had deliberately created Alassra and her sisters. First, the goddess had selected Dornal to be the father of her Chosen Ones, then she'd possessed Elue Shundar and married them together. They produced seven daughters in as many years. In the six centuries since then, the goddess had welcomed only thirteen grandchildren—and all but one of them were Alustriel's half-elf sons, the Aerasume.

Alassra had considered herself unalterably barren. It was only recently, when her sister Dove gave birth to a healthy, human son that her hopes had been reborn. Even so, they remained slim: she'd used too much magic, visited too many uncanny places to believe that simply wanting a child would ever be enough.

"I won't hold you responsible," Alassra repeated, more softly this time, "no matter what."

She began retrieving the parchments her outburst had scattered. When she'd collected them into an almost-tidy pile, her mind was calm enough to face the mirror again and continue her investigations. Quicksilver was creeping up the crystal when a bronze chime sounded in the palace's audience chamber and, by associated magic, in the back of Alassra's mind. The quicksilver flew away from the dome. Most of it fell back into the shining pool, but a few poisonous drops struck her skin where they clung and burned.

"What now?" she demanded.

Her voice scattered the parchment again and stunned whichever palace servant had stuck the chime. With a curse that made the parchment sheets fall like stones, Alassra reached for a gnarled staff. She spoke three simple words and a heartbeat later was standing in front of the Verdigris Throne. It was her usual way of answering a summons, but it never failed to leave her household retainers flat-footed and gaping.

"Happy birthday, Honored Aunt," her guest, whose arrival

had caused the summons, said with a smile.

He was tall, hearty, and wondrously pale; one of the Aerasume, Alustriel's sons who'd dedicated their lives to their mother. He wore a red signet ring on the third finger of his left hand; that meant his name was Boesild, or possibly Tarthilmor. Alassra could do almost anything except keep the names of her sister's twelve sons straight. Perhaps if she'd known them better, she could have told them apart. But she hadn't known them or their mother until after she'd lost Lailomun, after Mystra confronted her with her heritage.

There was no polite way to ask his name, and Alassra Shentrantra, the storm queen who'd face a basilisk with nerves of steel, had a phobic fear of being impolite to her still-unfamiliar family.

She said, "Thank you, Honored Nephew," and hoped he'd think she was following his example. Then she took the gift he offered, a bouquet of fragile snow-flowers.

"From my mother," he added, unnecessarily: Where else but in Silverymoon could anyone grow snow-flowers, and who but Alustriel could grow them in high summer? "I sent my gift directly to the palace kitchen: a fresh-caught string of bluefish. I remember you said they were your favorites. I'd hoped I could share supper with you this evening, Honored Aunt."

He was Tarthilmor then; Alassra was nearly certain she'd been talking to Tarthilmor when she mentioned her appetite for razor-toothed bluefish. They schooled off the Fang this time of year, which might tell her something about why he'd come calling—certainly not to wish his storm-tempered aunt a happy birthday. Alustriel must have told him to bring gifts. Alustriel was five years older than Alassra; she remembered family traditions and kept them alive. After Lailomun and Mystra, it was Alustriel who told her the family history, including the exact date of her birth.

And had the ever-efficient Alustriel also told her tall son to come calling because the private commemoration that

Aglarond's queen had planned—a candlelit supper with Elminster—wasn't going to happen? Alassra suspected Tarthilmor knew, but proving her suspicions might start a family war.

"I'd be delighted. At sundown? This storm will have cleared by then. I'll have a supper laid on the balcony overlooking the harbor. It will be very private."

For the briefest moment his eyes narrowed and a satisfied smile tugged his lips: Privacy was important and birthdays had nothing to do with this visit. Then he was Alustriel's son again, with impeccable manners and all the charm of—well, not Elminster or the Zulkir of Enchantment, but very charming all the same. "It will be a supper to remember,"

"I'm sure it will," Alassra replied, ending with an awkward pause where she should have spoken his name. Blue-fish notwithstanding, that fleeting smile reminded her more of Boesild than Tarthilmor.

"May I retire to a chamber until then? Between the storm and the fish, I could use a bath before dining with a queen—unless we want to attract flies as we eat."

Flies. For all her serenity, Alustriel had a keen sense of the absurd and she'd passed it along to the Aerasume.

"Of course."

Alassra clapped her hands and a retainer approached. "Show my nephew to the guest quarters and see to his needs."

The pair departed and Alassra departed as well, using her staff as before to transport her back to her privy chamber where the mirror answered her most desperate inquiry: Tarthilmor was riding in the forest north of Silverymoon; Boesild was the man flirting courteously with the Velprintalar servants. That mystery solved, the Simbul directed her attention to other matters. She studied the inky signatures of Zhentarim lords and the smoky plotting of barbarians far to the east of Rashemen, none of which had grown more dangerous since she last used the mirror. Closer to home, Alassra watched a handful of perennially

discontent Fangers talk vague treason amongst themselves, each of them a recognized portrait on the quicksilver: Within Aglarond, the mirror's vision was as sharp as her own, at least along the human-dominated coast. If there'd been a Red Wizard with them, the Thayan's presence would have glowed like a beacon.

When Alassra directed her attention to the Yuirwood the quicksilver surface seethed with fast-changing colors.

The ancient trees cast their own protection and, though it galled the Simbul's pride, her magic couldn't penetrate the forest canopy. Hot spots flickered then vanished. The Fang wasn't the only part of Aglarond where discontent flourished, but the most intractable of the Cha'Tel'Quessir tribes were, thankfully, those least likely to look beyond the forest for allies.

She let the forest fade and framed her final inquiry—
Zandilar's Dancer?

It was an oft-repeated and, therefore, quickly answered question. The mirror showed her a sturdy, blue-dun colt, still growing into his black-stockinged legs. There was a human man standing at his head and a half-elf perched upon his back. All three were sweat-soaked and wearied.

"Success at last!"

It had taken father and stepson the whole summer to break the two-year-old colt. She'd grown impatient with them. Another week and she'd have sent one of her Rashemaar horsemen to the village: They could break a horse in a morning. She'd send a horse-trader instead. Once the Simbul had Zandilar's Dancer in her stables, Elminster's curiosity would get the better of him. He'd come to see the colt and once here . . . She could be very charming herself, when charm was useful.

In the meantime, the storm had torn itself apart and the sun glowed orange through the tattered clouds. Alassra reached for her staff.

* * * * *

Boesild was waiting for her on the balcony. Scrubbed and shaved, he looked quite the prince in linen breeches and an embroidered shirt that hadn't come from the palace wardrobe. By contrast, Alassra wore her customary storm-cloud gown, a bit worse in the bodice for quicksilver burns it had taken earlier in the day.

"You look . . . enchanting," her guest said with a diplomatic smile.

"Nonsense, I look like a street-waif."

His smile turned genuine. "A street-waif who sunders Thayan armies with a wooden staff."

"Not tonight, I hope," Alassra replied, leaning said staff against the table as she sat in the chair he held for her. "A little company on my birthday is pleasant; an army would be too much."

He was wrong about the staff. It wasn't a weapon; she never took it into battle. The wood had a memory for places, though, and could take her almost anywhere she'd ever been. It was the easiest way in and out of her tower workroom.

Alassra's nephew spoke entertainingly while they ate, savoring the excellent fish and the culinary talents of the Simbul's underworked cooks until there was only a bowl of iced fruit beside the melting snow-flowers on the table between them.

"So tell me, Boesild, why have you come to Velprintalar?"

"Not for your birthday, Honored Aunt. I didn't think you'd be fooled."

"I'd have dined alone without you."

A silent moment passed. The first star appeared in the violet sky. And Boesild dug into a suede belt pouch. He produced two small disks, which, after examination, he laid on the table.

"I found these yesterday in Nethra."

Supper soured in the Simbul's stomach. Nethra was one of the port cities south of the Yuirwood. Like all the cities of

Aglarond and Thay, Nethra had started out as a Mulhorandi outpost. The Nethrans fought for and won their independence as the Mulhorand Empire faded, but their freedom was a chancy thing, balanced between Thayan greed and the price of Aglarondan protection. These days Nethra paid a handsome tithe into the Velprintalar treasury, and Alassra paid a reward for any Red Wizard tokens taken within its territory.

The Aerasume weren't bounty hunters.

"How did you acquire them?" she asked.

"I was out late in a quarter where respectable folk lock their doors at sunset and stay inside, no matter what, until the sun's up again. I heard a cry for help—"

Alassra's eyebrows rose to a dramatic height.

"A full-throated cry, I assure you. Naturally, I investigated."

"Naturally," she agreed.

Boesild pushed one of the disks closer to his aunt. "I was too late. This one was already dead and the other, fool that she was, attacked me."

"Foolishness is part of Red Wizard training."

"Indeed, though I didn't guess she was a wizard until after I'd broken her neck. They have a kind of scent, you know. That one," Boesild indicated the disk he'd pushed, "had cloaked himself well. Still, I'd have known him for what he was if we'd come in sight of each other, but the woman—oh, my Honored Aunt—she could have deceived you."

"Never."

Pale hair swayed in the twilight as Boesild shook his head.

"There was nothing, nothing, about her while she lived and only the faintest trace after she'd died. I wouldn't have found the token—wouldn't even have looked for one—if my suspicions hadn't already been aroused."

Alassra took the nearest disk in her sensitive fingers. Red Wizards carried such disks as proof of their place in the hierarchies of their various disciplines and as means to summon protection from their superiors.

"Had he called for help?"

Boesild shook his head. "Another interesting thing: She'd slain him without magic, smashed his skull in with a cobblestone. She fought me the same way. As I said, I'd no notion what she was until after I'd killed her."

Reluctantly, the Simbul picked up the second disk. It was, as her nephew promised, lifeless. Wrapped in cloth, as it surely had been, she would not have been aware of its owner's true identity unless they touched. Her quicksilver mirror would never discern it. The implications of that were dire.

"I don't suppose there was anything else? No codes or messages? No tattoos? She didn't say anything before she died?"

"Nothing at all. They'd both peeled their skin. My guess is she'd recognized the man in passing and hunted him down. Mystra knows that's common enough among the Red Wizards. Is there one man or woman among them who truly knows the meaning of the word trust, given or taken? It wouldn't be the first time one of their little wars has claimed victims in another realm, but Red Wizards slaying each other with stones? I don't like it, Honored Aunt."

"You don't like it!" Alassra let out a bitter laugh. "You don't know the meaning of your words. I'll keep these." She closed her fist over the tokens.

"Of course, I'm sorry—they're a poor birthday present."

"No, a valued one. You'll understand if I leave you to your own devices now? I've lost my taste for fruit and company." She reached for the staff.

* * * * *

The Simbul's mirror shone with its own light when she returned to her privy chamber.

Show me Nethra! she demanded before the echo of her entrance faded. What's loose in Nethra?

Nothing untoward, according to the mirror with a mix of Aglarondan clarity and foreign fuzziness.

Nothing other than what she'd expected, based on Boesild's

tale and the tokens clutched in her hand.

Alassra took the noisier of the disks, the one that had belonged to the dead man, and balanced it carefully on the cap of the crystal dome. The quicksilver flowed up to cover it. The image of Nethra blurred, then reconstructed itself exactly as before. It was the same with the dead woman's token.

"Cold tea and crumpets!" the queen grumbled, resorting to the harmless curse the Rashemaar Witches had taught her a long time ago and a measure of the foreboding she felt.

Red Wizards rarely traveled alone; as Boesild pointed out, they didn't trust one another and the zulkirs trusted least of all. At best, Boesild had stumbled across a pair that had lost the little trust that held it together. At worst, he'd interrupted a skirmish between rival groups, which remained invisible if they remained in Nethra.

And if they'd left Nethra?

The quicksilver trembled in rhythm with Alassra's frustration: If they'd left Nethra, they could be anywhere. She didn't worry too much about Red Wizards infiltrating the Yuirwood. Little as the wilder Cha'Tel'Quessir might love Aglarond's queen, they preferred her to anyone from Thay. A Red Wizard falling afoul of them might well wish he'd crossed the Simbul's path instead. The Fangers were a different problem; they should know better—their parents and grandparents had formed the core of Halacar's defeated army. But their discontent was rooted in nostalgia for a time that had never been, and their ears were fertile ground for sedition.

Alassra could, and would, keep a closer watch on the Fang. She had the resources: trusted men and women, and magic, too. Keeping watch wouldn't solve the greater problem. Taking the dead woman's token from the quicksilver, Alassra polished it between her fingers and studied it by the light of a spell-dissolving lamp. Foul smells poisoned the air: blood pearl and dragon's wing foremost among them; not the

Simbul's favorite reagents, but common enough in Thay. Probing deeper, she heated the token in the lamp's flame. It melted into a mottled lump while she learned nothing about the Red Wizard who'd cast the spell.

She had better luck, in a sense, with the dead man's token, which had been protected by a familiar spell cast by a familiar mage: Lauzoril. His green-eyed grinning face was harder and colder in her mind's eye than it had been earlier on the quicksilver. The world would be a better place when he was gone—at least until the new zulkir learned his predecessor's tricks.

"Somebody's stalking your spies, Lauzoril," she said to the man who wasn't there. "Someone's turned on you. You'd best look carefully among your allies." She thought of the zulkirs together and shook the thought from her head. "Let me look upon something peaceful instead: Zandilar's Dancer. Show me Zandilar's Dancer and the boy. Take me to Sulalk."

The mirror obliged, showing them both bedded down for the night, the colt in a pasture, Ember stripped down to his breeches and smiling as he dreamt in his narrow bed. Alassra envied them a moment—Mystra's Chosen didn't need to sleep; their dreams were mostly daydreams, pale imitations of the real thing—then, without prompting, the quicksilver roiled. The Simbul, expecting the unimaginable, readied a potent barrage of spells.

The mirror's image resolved into four men hunched around a plank table in a dirt-floor room. Alassra recognized the room. Sulalk was too small to have an inn or tavern. When folk gathered or strangers visited, they gathered and visited in the sacking room behind the mill. The four men were strangers, travel-stained traders with gamblers' eyes. Town merchants sent such men into the countryside each summer to measure the coming harvest. The traders drove hard bargains and weren't beloved by the farmers, but they'd been part of Aglarondan life longer than the Simbul.

Alassra saw no reason for alarm. Though she'd constructed the mirror, she didn't always understand its workings: It had shown her scenes both unexpected and trivial before. She was releasing her uncast spells when she read a word as it formed on one man's lips.

Horse, he'd said—in what tone Alassra couldn't say because the mirror didn't reflect sound. She thought she saw him add the word tomorrow. She was no lip-reader; she couldn't be sure, but a grain trader could easily become a horse trader for a day. He'd have no trouble finding a buyer for Ember's colt. She'd have to buy it from him herself, if she didn't get to the boy first.

The Simbul had advantages—powers of persuasion—no trader could match. Alassra needed a bit of time to assemble her traveling gear and to remind herself of the spells no traveling wizard should be without, but after that she'd would be off to Sulalk to purchase a birthday present Elminster would have to visit Aglarond to claim.

She planned to reach the village in the late morning hours. Judging by the amount of ale the four men had already drunk, she'd arrive with time to spare.

3

Thazalhar, in eastern Thay

Midnight, between the thirteenth and fourteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

In a silent crypt beneath an isolated estate of Thazalhar, two men, both of them necromancers, neither of them alive, awaited the arrival of a third. They waited patiently because patience was all they had, bound as they were in bandages and seated in ebony chairs that flickered with the turquoise light of unbreakable warding. The pair was also bound by ties of blood and ambition that went deeper than the misunderstandings that had led Gweltaz to slay Chazsinal who sat on his right.

The blood was between fathers and sons. It reached beyond the crypt to a third living man whose footfalls echoed

outside. The ambition, cherished by all three, was nothing less than the destruction of Szass Tam, Zulkir of Necromancy.

A century ago, when Gweltaz had been an aspiring necromancer, he'd caught the zulkir's undead eye. For a while, he'd been Szass Tam's favorite. In the time-honored tradition of Thayan treachery, Gweltaz had coveted Tam's place atop the necromancers' hierarchy. He plotted against his mentor. His plots failed, spectacularly. Gweltaz paid for that failure with his mortal life and a final lesson: Tam, who understood tradition without respecting it, did not teach any pupil, however favored, enough to threaten his own position. Chazsinal, by then a novice necromancer himself, had rescued Gweltaz's charred bones from a demon-guarded midden on the heights of Thaymount. For the next ten years Chazsinal abandoned his own studies to collect the rare unguents necessary to restore his father to a semblance of life. He cast the spells successfully, at no small risk to himself. Then, heeding Gweltaz's demands for filial loyalty, he surrendered what little remained of his own ambitions to his father's need for revenge.

Seven times, they'd risked everything in schemes to bring Tam down, and seven times they'd failed so miserably, so early, and so completely that the zulkir never became aware of their plots. Gweltaz came to believe that his son was a half-wit, a fool incapable of executing the simplest plan. Badgered by his father, Chazsinal came to believe the same thing. Succumbing to vice and debauchery, he sired a son on a green-eyed Eltabbaran slave and, watching the infant take its first wobbly steps, suffered a chilling revelation:

Chazsinal was proud of the part he'd played in creating a new human life. He loved his son, as he understood loving, as Gweltaz had, perhaps, loved him so many years ago. But—with an honesty uncommon in the back alleys of Eltabbar—Chazsinal realized paternal pride, even paternal love, would doom the boy as surely as it had doomed him. No man

or woman of Thay, no Red Wizard worth his robes, would ever teach a child enough to threaten his own place in the treacherous world. This would be especially damning for little Lauzoril because, with his father and grandfather in hiding and cut off from all other necromancers, he'd have no other teachers: He'd learn less than Chazsinal knew, which was less than Gweltaz knew, which everyone knew wasn't enough.

Chazsinal could have lived with his revelation; he lived comfortably with the greater shame of his own failings. But Gweltaz, using spellcraft he hadn't shared with his only son, had discovered Lauzoril and had demanded that the boy be brought to the moldering mausoleum they called home.

Gweltaz wanted a new and presumably more able pupil. Gweltaz wanted a new son, and that was something Chazsinal could not permit.

So before his son was weaned, Chazsinal took Lauzoril from his mother and placed him with the Eltabbaran enchanters, where, the boy's innate charm along with a sackful of gold secured him a place on the student roster. Then Chazsinal worked his best magic on his own memory to convince himself that his son was dead.

Chazsinal's best was never good enough. Gweltaz saw through his son's deception. He struck swiftly and precisely; Chazsinal's flesh began to putrefy between one breath and the next. Gweltaz regretted his rage immediately, but once done, the magic could not be undone and the best that Gweltaz could do was clutch his son's spirit to his undead heart.

They remained together, out of sight and forgotten, caught in the crack between life and death, aware of Lauzoril's progress through the enchanters' ranks and aware of Szass Tam as their great enemy's influence grew to unprecedented heights. Convinced that Tam would move against them the moment he became aware of their continued existence, they denied themselves every opportunity to contact Lauzoril.

Then, some thirty years after Chazsinal died, Lauzoril found them.

Their son and grandson had become a zulkir, albeit of enchantment, a discipline opposed to necromancy and, in their considered opinion, decidedly inferior as well. They restrained their prejudice when Lauzoril transferred Gweltaz's fragile remains to the Thazalhar estate and, more importantly, saw his father restored with the same spells that preserved Gweltaz. Lauzoril even took up their cause against Szass Tam. But there was no controlling the Zulkir of Enchantment, not as Gweltaz had controlled Chazsinal.

"My son brings us supper," Chazsinal said, amber light seeping through his linen bandages. "I can smell the blood." Gweltaz snorted. "Control yourself. He starves us, treats us like beggars and slaves while you fawn at his feet. He brings us farmyard beasts, strangled with a dainty cord. His hands are always clean; he has no taste for death."

"Haven't I?" the zulkir inquired mildly, his voice entering the crypt while his body continued its descent down the spiral stairs. "Then why do I keep you around, Grandfather? Not for the company, I assure you—or the smell."

"For my advice, young fool, and my wisdom. I know things you cannot imagine."

"Of course, how could I forget? You know everything about death—especially your own."

Blue-green light outlined the door, as Lauzoril released wards meant to protect the living members of his household. He had no fear of his ancestors. One word from him and they would be consumed within their bandages.

"I know Szass Tam! I know how his mind works, how he thinks, the way he plans. Without my warnings, you'd have died ten times over."

There was a measure of truth in Gweltaz's claims, which Lauzoril acknowledged by throwing him the larger of the two strangled piglets he'd brought. He threw the smaller to his father, whose hollow-eyed, pleading glance he did not

acknowledge at all.

Lauzoril understood Gweltaz. There were a hundred men and women just like him in his own discipline. Treacherous and greedy, they were unaware of their mediocrity. Their conversation was shaped by centuries of tradition, ritual, and rehearsed invective. Living or undead, Lauzoril used them in the great game he played with his peers and disposed of them when their ambitions exceeded their usefulness.

Gweltaz trod the fine line between utility and arrogance; he was very careful never to cross it.

That line blurred when Lauzoril considered Chazsinal, who was not as useful to any scheme but who had—for whatever reason—delivered Lauzoril to the enchanters. Lauzoril had only to look at Chazsinal to see the fate he had avoided: A man could stand against Gweltaz, who was almost as good as he thought he was, but a boy in leading strings would have been broken utterly.

By that measure, Lauzoril owed Chazsinal everything, but everything else about Chazsinal grated on his nerves. He paid his debt with spite and contempt.

Silence hung in the crypt while the undead necromancers consumed the flesh he'd brought them. When damp gristle was all that remained of their meal and the two necromancers were suffused with a fresh, bloody glow, Lauzoril opened the conversation.

"The matter with Druxus Rhym is finished. He'll be watching his back too closely to make trouble for a while."

Neither Chazsinal nor Gweltaz cared about Rhym. Alteration, like enchantment, was inferior magic in necromancers' eyes. But the Zulkir of Alteration had allied himself with Szass Tam: A strike against him was a strike against their enemy, and that they approved. Besides, the pair was starved for more than blood. Lauzoril's visits were their only direct contact with the world beyond the crypt. They hungered for his voice. Gweltaz contained himself; Chazsinal could not.

"How? What did you do? How many died? Did they suffer?"

Lauzoril sat back in his comfortably upholstered chair. These were the moments when he was grateful for his undead relations. Every man needed a confidant who revelled in his triumphs and commiserated his defeats. For a zulkir, true confidants were rarer than dragon's blood, more precious than a golem's tears. The Zulkir of Enchantment had two of them. He propped his legs on the table, crossing them at the ankle, consciously creating the image of a man in complete control of his world and enjoying every moment of it.

"They suffered and suffer still, I imagine. Rhym believes they betrayed him. He won't be content until they confess. But their confessions will be lies ..."

Lauzoril allowed himself a smile. Last month, Rhym had begun a war against Lauzoril's faction within the zulkirs. It was an undeclared war, as most were in Thay. No one was supposed to know who'd poisoned the fish at a very private banquet, least of all the zulkirs of Enchantment, Invocation, and Conjunction, each of whom had lost a handful of reliable aides that night. Lauzoril hadn't consulted with Lord Thrul of Invocation or Lord Nevron of Conjunction. Disguised as a cook—a very charming and persuasive cook—he'd started with the pot slaves and worked his way up to Druxus Rhym. Then he'd plotted his revenge.

His plan was simple: a few false clues planted in fertile ground throughout Thay, a few rumors whispered in suspicious ears, and Rhym imagined himself the victim of conspiracy and rebellion within his own school. By last night, six ranking transmuters were known dead, another score had disappeared. No one suspected Enchantment's role in the purge. Lauzoril gained no glory for his schemes, but he'd taken no risk, either and that was the way he liked to play the zulkirs' game. Don't waste your own strength, that was the supreme lesson he'd learned from his predecessor:

Make your enemy waste his.

"You're not as good as you think you are, boy," Gweltaz said,

as if he could pluck a man's thoughts from his head—which, perhaps, he could: Lauzoril did not know the limits of his grandfather's abilities, only that he, Lauzoril, held the upper hand. "While you were celebrating, a man died in Nethra—your man in Nethra. He suffered, too."

Lauzoril uncrossed his feet, then crossed them again and remained where he was, though his calm had been shattered. He racked his memory to remember who he had in Nethra and why. A face swam out of memory: Vur Bract, a youngish man with a bent for merchantry. He tended the enchanter's affairs, buying cheap and selling dear; he'd had a rewarding life ahead of him.

"How did he die?" Chazsinal interrupted his son's remembering. "Who killed him—the witch-queen?"

Despite himself, Lauzoril stiffened; Gweltaz noticed.

"Oh, come now—who else would kill one of yours in Nethra? Just because you spy on her, did you think you were exempt from her wrath, boy? If she knew—when she finds out, you'll find yourself strung across the abyss with Tam on one side, her on the other."

"The spell will fade before the Simbul thinks to look for it."

"Of course it will—enchantments fade rather quickly, don't they?"

Lauzoril's answer was a sneer and a shower of sparks that swirled around the pitch-soaked bandages. The zulkir didn't think of the dagger as a spy. He'd enchanted both blade and studded-leather hilt with a variety of spells for the challenge of stabilizing so much magic in so small and mundane an object. He'd maneuvered it into Aglarond for the same reasons. The glimpses his enchantments provided of the Simbul's workroom—once a day, but never at the same time and never longer than the pause between two heartbeats—were scarcely the useful information a zulkir expected from his spies. She was seldom there and the knife had not become one of her favorites.

No one except Gweltaz and Chazsinal knew what he'd

accomplished or the pleasure he derived from the stolen moments of the Simbul's life. At times like this, Lauzoril wished he'd never told them—but they were his confidants. With them, he took risks.

"Forget her, Lauzoril," Gweltaz advised when the sparks were dead coals peppering Chazsinal's bandages. "A man like you—you're still in your natural prime. Add some spice to your celebrations, O Mighty Zulkir. Visit the stews and the brothels; it worked well enough for your own father. You need a son, Lauzoril."

"That's not open to discussion," Lauzoril said, raising three fingers of his right hand in a gesture that made both necromancers fade within their bandages.

Whatever Lauzoril's interest in Thay's archenemy, it didn't include romance. He'd never laid eyes on her, never met or heard of anyone who had and survived the experience. It was a known fact: The woman slew Thayan wizards without provocation—witness what she'd done to Bract. And, anyway, other women didn't tempt Lauzoril. He had a wife, the granddaughter of his predecessor, and while he was not compelled to be faithful to her, he'd made ordinary promises that he'd found surprisingly easy to keep.

He had children, as well: two of them, but not the sons Gweltaz deemed necessary. His daughters were beautiful, especially the younger one, and wise, especially the elder. He kept them safe in Thazalhar where desolation and the ghosts of slaughtered armies reinforced his enchantments. They were innocent, both of them ignorant of all magic and of the life their father led when he was not with them. He brought them gifts whenever he returned and told them stories about a world that didn't exist. Their joy when they welcomed him kept him sane.

"I have staked my own life on Tam's defeat, but that is my purpose. It goes no further. Mimuay and Nyasia have no parts in our drama—"

"Leave the pretty butterflies to their peace," Gweltaz

countered, bursting out of his bandages. "I have no quarrel with your plans for their lives. But a son, Lauzoril. A man hasn't left his mark on the world until he's got a son."

They both turned toward Chazsinal whose essence remained below the bandages, then Lauzoril shrugged, simply and effectively. The discussion of children was once again closed. That left a dead enchanter in Nethra, a matter not so easily dismissed.

"Bract's allegiance to Enchantment was well known," Lauzoril mused aloud. "The Nethrans proclaim their independence from Thay and Aglarond. Proclamations must be defended. They have obligations; I'll remind their councilors—"

"Waste of time, boy! The silver-eyed queen's behind your man's murder. She wants dominion over her southern coast, and she'll kill every man, woman, and child of Thay to gain it. Vur Bract's just the beginning. Attack, Mighty Zulkir! Use your little toy and take her by surprise. Even if you cannot slay her, a little triumph against Aglarond will inspire your allies and weaken Szass Tam when he's already weak."

Lauzoril shook his head. There'd never be any little triumphs against Aglarond, only all-out wars with their twin possibilities of complete victory or defeat. Centuries ago the Red Wizards had fought such a war against Mulhorand and won it, but Thazalhar, where the final battles were fought, had never recovered. Faerun didn't need another Thazalhar in Thay or Aglarond.

"I won't start a war that no one will win, Grandfather. The crime fell in Nethra; the Nethrans will bear responsibility. There are other ways to deal with Aglarond's queen. Better ways."

The zulkir unslung his propped-up feet and headed for the crypt door. Midway up the spiral stairs, he leaned against the wall, and brought all his thoughts to bear on the enchanted knife. He could, even at this distance, trigger the scrying spells and, for the price of a numbing headache,

hold its attention for an extra few heartbeats.

Lauzoril almost lost the image before he could sharpen it: In greatest of imaginable coincidences, the Simbul had taken his work from the jumbled box where she usually kept it. She held it between her hands. An awesome silver heat seared the zulkir's thoughts; but for the wall, he would have fallen. He whispered the name of the god he worshiped in privacy: "Kelemvor! What manner of magic possesses her?"

The god of death, traditional patron of Thazalhar and, since the demise of both Myrkul and Cyric, preferred deity of Enchantment's zulkir, didn't answer, but the sound of his own voice calmed Lauzoril's nerves. He wrested his thoughts from the Simbul herself and concentrated on the place where she was, the objects around her. A spellbook lay open nearby—another moment and he could have abstracted one of her spells, but his interest lay elsewhere.

Thay.

He let his thoughts mingle with hers.

Thay. The Wizards of Thay.

Nethra came back to him, both the word and images of the city she knew by sight, smell, and sound. Gweltaz had guessed right; Lauzoril's fists clenched in frustration. Then... Two deaths. A man and a woman. An enchanter and something else. In Nethra. Two dead magicians. Two dead wizards.

Lauzoril's hands relaxed. "Two dead. Bract and his murderer." He was relieved beyond measure but not surprised until he beheld his own face floating in the Simbul's silvery thoughts.

Why? they both asked.

Lauzoril withdrew to Thazalhar without waiting for an answer.

4

The Village of Sulalk, in Aglarond

Early morning, the fourteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

"Momma was crying last night. Soft, so you wouldn't hear, but I did. She's sad all the time, Bro."

Knee-deep in a stream with a weighted gaff cocked above his shoulder in the hope of swatting an unlucky fish, Bro answered his sister with a soft, noncommittal grunt.

"She says you're leaving, Bro. Are you going to leave?"

"No," he lied.

A shadow flickered in the water. Bro struck quickly, stunning the fish with the gaff and knocking it onto the grassy bank. Tay-Fay approached it warily. She was unnerved by their spines and texture, but Shali and Dent said she was old enough to be useful and that Bro could teach her.

"Why are fish slimy, Bro?"

"They just are. It's easier if you grab 'em from the front."

Carefully following his instructions, she stood behind the basket. "Why don't they close their eyes?"

"Quiet, Taefaeli. You're scaring the fish."

"They don't have ears. How can I scare the fish when they can't hear?"

Bro backhanded the gaff and sent a gust of water at his sister. She screamed and started running. If she'd run toward the village, he'd have let her run and faced the consequences later, but she was going the wrong way.

A few of his longer strides brought Bro within grabbing distance. He swept her clean off the ground, both his hands secure around her waist. She shrieked with delight.

He'd gone another two steps before sound overwhelmed his ears. Thunder, though the morning sky was bright blue and cloudless. Thunder, striking his back like a fist of wind. Bro stumbled as he stopped. Clutching his sister in his arms, he turned: The grass and bushes, the trees themselves, all bent to the mighty rumbling. Gradually, they straightened, but the ringing in his ears continued.

"Sulalk!" He shouted and heard a whisper. "Momma! Dent!"

Bro started to run again. His sister clung to him like a burr. There was a second blast as he splashed across the stream

and a third, short of the hill crest between the stream and the village. A fist of sound pounded the breath from his lungs. Bro dropped to his knees. Tay-Fay's mouth was an open grimace, but for all Bro could hear her tears were silent. He scooped her up and staggered to the crest.

They could see the mill and a plume of smoke rising from its thatched roof. There were other plumes. Matching what he saw against the Sulalk he held in his mind, Bro knew immediately that Dent's cottage—their home—was on fire. Running too fast for memory, he carried Tay-Fay along the path he knew better than any other.

Flame fingers danced in the thatch of Dent's cottage and in the wooden lintels. Bro blinked several times, as if opening his eyes wide enough would rouse him from a nightmare, but he was awake and the fire was real.

Another blast shook sense back into him: Whatever had happened here, it continued and neither he nor his sister were safe.

Safe?

Safe was the cottage. Safe was his mother who always knew what to do.

Shali spent her mornings inside the cottage. A wave of horror washed down Bro's body. When it passed his spirit was as numbed as his ears. He pried Tay-Fay from his shirt and shoulders.

"Stay right here. Don't move. Don't follow me. Don't go anywhere until I come back for you."

Bro couldn't hear his voice, but his pale and quaking sister seemed to understand. She sat and folded her arms around her knees. He patted the top of her head as he strode past, into the smoke, beneath the fire.

"Mother!"

He doubled over coughing. Smoke and instinct had closed his eyes; he forced them open. Eerie light from the burning thatch enabled him to see shapes around him. For one awful instant nothing was familiar, then he recognized the stairs to

the loft where he slept; the hearth, where fire never burned in summertime, the table where they ate, the bench where they sat, and finally, horribly, his mother between the bench and table.

Shali lay on her back. One arm was crooked beneath her, the other extended above her head, across the hearthstones. Rizcarn had had the same awkward, uncomfortable appearance after he fell from the tree, except Rizcarn's neck had been obscenely twisted; Shali's remained straight.

Bro took heart: She was hurt, he told himself, but alive. The blasts had knocked her off her feet. She'd struck her head on the hearthstones and hadn't moved since. She was unconscious, but alive. ...

Alive.

Bro repeated the word in his mind as he knelt and slid his hands beneath her back. His hopes soared as he freed her cramped arm: he thought he'd heard a sigh. They shattered a heartbeat later: There was warm liquid beneath her skull. Blood. A lot of it. Too much.

He put his hand to the hollow of her neck. When Bro pressed as hard as he dared blood flowed over his other hand, still beneath her head. He felt no pulse. No life. The fire ceased to matter. The blasts, another of which shook the cottage and showered him with sparks, ceased to matter. All that mattered lay in his arms. Bleeding. Not unconscious—dead.

Bro couldn't move, couldn't face the next moment of his own life until a sixth sense, newly born in his grief and rage, advised him that he was no longer alone in the cottage. He was strangely calm and confident, easing his mother's body from his arms to the floor, breaking the knotted thong that held a clutch of brightly colored beads in the hollow of her lifeless neck and placing them in a belt-slung pouch. His balance was perfect as he rose into a crouch and stayed perfect when he stretched for the cleaver Shali must have been holding when the blast struck. He saw each flame-cast shadow as his legs pushed him upright, each whirling drop

of his mother's blood as he spun around, ready to hack apart any intruder.

He had all the time in the world—and needed every bit to stop his hand before the cleaver slashed through Tay-Fay's neck.

His sister never listened, and she didn't comprehend that her brother had nearly killed her. Arms outstretched and ready to wrap tightly around his waist, Tay-Fay barrelled into Bro's gut, knocking the breath, the calm and confidence out of him. A heartbeat earlier, everything had been clear. Now there was confusion and Tay-Fay's innocent trust that while she clung to him there was still a safe place in the world.

In her world, not his.

Not his, not ever again.

Yet another blast rocked the cottage and with it, chunks of burning wood from the beams came down. They jolted Bro into renewed awareness of danger. He had little experience with danger on this scale, but he knew, without hesitation, its source: Magic.

Nothing else could cause the damage, the cloudless thunder, the fire and death; but magic could rise from many sources. Storytellers filled Aglarond's long winter evenings with magic battles, invading Thayan wizards, and deaths too horrible to be described.

The oldest tales were the same way throughout the land: humans and Cha'Tel'Quessir together, defeating common enemies. Since the deaths of the Gray Sisters a century ago, when humans took the Verdigris Throne, the tales had diverged. In the Yuirwood, the Cha'Tel'Quessir were grateful for the Simbul's defense of the forest, but she could defeat whole armies on her own and, increasingly, the Cha'Tel'Quessir were inclined to let her.

Let humanity fight its battles with human blood and magic, the tribal elders said; Cha'Tel'Quessir began and ended with the Yuirwood.

Bro—Ebroin of MightyTree—had never felt closer to his

Cha'Tel'Quessir roots than when a length of burning roof beam crashed to the floor between him and his sister. His first thought when he'd carried her outside was to run for the trees and the forest. His second, wiser, thought was that Tay-Fay couldn't run that far. His third was for the colt, Zandilar's Dancer, who could.

He was halfway down the path to the barnyard when a fourth, unwelcome, thought snuck into his overheated mind: the colt—his colt—might be the cause of this magic-born destruction. Although he hadn't seen Zandilar since the colt was born, the memory of her was always near the surface of his thoughts.

Come when you're ready.

Even now the apparition shimmered behind his eyes. Had Zandilar danced for someone else? Had she withdrawn the invitation and come to claim the colt herself?

Bro came to a flat-footed stop short of the barnyard. He stared at a fencepost, not knowing what held his attention until his mind snapped and he saw a man's body—the lower half of it. Something—magic—had sliced through his gut. His upper half was missing, not flung aside or shattered, but gone. The gaping wound was dark and shiny. There was no blood, not on the ground, nor the post.

The smell of roast meat was in the air.

The boots were Dent's.

Bro's bones froze. Shivering free of Tay-Fay, he dropped to his knees and retched without result.

A small, light hand tapped his shoulder: Tay-Fay. Bro prayed to all the gods that she didn't see what leaned against the fence post. For her sake, he gulped down his terror, raised his head, met her eyes. She pointed away from the fence post, at a man coming toward them.

By his clothes, Bro marked the man as one of the grain traders who'd been at the mill since new moon. He'd had dark blonde hair then, but he was bald now and his face was dark and blotchy.

Burns, Bro told himself, though even at this distance he could see that the marks weren't burns. Scars, then—or tattoos. All the winter tales agreed that the Red Wizards covered their faces with tattoos and covered their tattoos when they came to Aglarond.

Bad cess, Dent had said when the grain traders arrived a month before Sulalk's grain was ripe. They were different men than those who'd come in previous years. Their prices were better and they paid in advance. That pleased some of the Sulalkers. They sold their grain while it was still on the stalk, but not Bro's stepfather.

I'll wait, Dent had said. No good comes of selling the grain before it's reaped, or selling it to strangers. Mark me well, Bro, they've got something to hide. The truth will come out.

And it had, out, for all the good truth had done for Dent. The traders were spies, Thayan wizards, and whatever their purpose in Sulalk, they weren't leaving witnesses. The man had noticed him and Tay-Fay. They had one choice left: they could run and be blasted from behind, or they could stand and meet death face-on.

Bro thought of a third choice. A scorched pitchfork lay at Dent's side. Bro seized it and vaulted over the fence. The wizard raised his hands in a dramatic gesture. Bro's breath caught in his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, only to open them again a moment later, when he found he was still alive.

Magic didn't always work. Suddenly, a scared half-elf with a pitchfork had the advantage over a wizard. With the shaft braced against his flank, Bro broke into a run. He pursued the tattooed man across the fenced-in yard, catching him at the stile steps and thrusting the fork's tines into his back. The wizard died swiftly. His shriek was the first sound Bro heard since he'd clambered across the stream a lifetime ago. A swift death wasn't enough, not for Dent or Sulalk, certainly not for his mother.

Bro jerked the pitchfork free. When the corpse fell to the

ground, he pierced it again and again. He'd have kept at his bloody work until his arms tired, but another blast drove the madness out. Seeing what he'd done, Bro let the pitchfork fall. He ran back to the fence, wiping his hands on his trousers as he went.

"Tay-Fay! Tay-Fay!" The sounds were barely audible to his ears.

His sister hadn't wandered. She stood by the fence post, sprinkling blades of grass over Dent's legs; the gods alone knew why. Bro didn't ask, just wiped his hands one last time before extending them toward her. She dropped the last few broken blades and wrapped her fingers around his.

The barn was dim, as it always had been, but eerie, too, when all Bro could hear was echoes. He cursed himself for leaving the pitchfork behind: Every dusty shadow here might hide another wizard. Movement flickered in the corner of his eye. He pulled his sister close and waited.

Heart beats passed; Tay-Fay squirmed. Bro lifted her onto his shoulders.

His heart sank when he saw the open door to Dancer's stall, the empty peg where the colt's knotted halter usually hung. He was too late. The wizards had gotten what they'd come for. Or—bitter thought—Dent had done him a favor and set the colt out to pasture before he died. A hand, not his own, brushed away Bro's first tear. He tried to set his sister down, but she wouldn't release his shirt.

They approached the stall together.

They weren't too late.

Zandilar's Dancer had squirreled himself into the far corner. The colt's neck was flat, his ears were flatter against his sweat-soaked head and there were white rings around his eyes. If his ears hadn't been ringing from the thunder blasts, Bro knew they would have ached from the sound of Dancer's panicked fury. It wasn't safe to enter the stall. He called the colt's name, hoping to calm him but Dancer ignored him.

Belatedly, Bro realized there was someone else in the stall.

A pale-haired stranger stood in another corner. The stranger wore dark boots, trousers, and a belted shirt. Men's clothes such as the grain-traders had worn, but this stranger was a woman whom Bro had never seen before—unless one of the wizards had been better disguised than the rest. She was taller than most women and slender enough to pass for Cha'Tel'Quessir. Indeed, Bro thought she was Cha'Tel'Quessir, until she studied him with eyes that shone with their own milky light.

She pointed a long forefinger at the space between his eyes. Bro had faced an angry wizard already this morning; he wasn't fool enough to think he'd survive a second encounter. He unwound an unresisting sister from his shoulders and pressed her face against his breast.

"Ember?"

He saw the stranger's lips move, but her voice was magic inside his head. He wondered, briefly, how she knew Shali's name for him. Not that it mattered. The stranger's eyes blazed; Bro closed his.

"Worse than that, wizard."

Her voice echoed between Bro's ears. His knees grew weak and he prayed that he wouldn't fall before she struck him down.

"I am the witch-queen of Aglarond and you've made your very last mistake."

A force like the kick of the mightiest horse knocked Bro sideways. He struck his head on the doorpost. Like Shali, he thought. . . like Mother . . . and then he thought nothing at all.

* * * * *

"Bro! Wake up, Bro! Hurry!"

Bro woke up; he hadn't been asleep. He didn't know what he'd been doing, or where he was, or who the little girl tugging on his sleeve was, not until he took a deep breath. The little girl was his sister. He was on the packed dirt ground outside Dancer's stall. What he'd been doing—how

he'd fallen—that remained a mystery that Bro tried to solve by raising his head. Pain threatened to blast his skull from the inside out. When it subsided, Bro was sitting and the mystery was solved. He remembered everything from the moment he put his feet on the floor this morning to the stranger's milky eyes and the words she'd left in his head.

"Hurry, Bro!"

Tay-Fay retreated a step and, with her hands braced adultlike on her hips, stamped her foot impatiently. A man's body sprawled behind her, made visible by her retreat. At least Bro thought the mangled corpse had once been a man; it didn't belong to the pale-haired woman who'd struck him down.

"Hurry," Tay-Fay repeated. Her voice was faint, but clear.

"She's getting away. She's taking your horse."

She—the pale-haired woman, the witch-queen of Aglarond—Bro gasped as the morning's events formed a pattern in his thoughts. The Simbul had come to Sulalk because she knew everything that happened in Aglarond and because everything in Aglarond belonged to her, if she wanted it. The Red Wizards had followed the queen, because they were her sworn enemies and that's what enemies did: follow each other and fight whenever, wherever they could.

Wizards didn't care if a handful of Aglarondan farmers got in their way. Maybe the Simbul had cared. She hadn't killed him when she'd had the chance. He could almost wish she had.

"Bro-o-o!" Tay-Fay persisted, turning his name into a melody.

"She's getting away!"

With Zandilar's Dancer. Bro had no real hope of separating the Simbul and her prize. As a loyal Aglarondan, he shouldn't even try, but broken pride and a broken heart would destroy him as surely as her magic if he didn't. The half-elf rose with his human sister's help. He wasn't quite himself; the barn spun dimly before he was ready to follow Tay-Fay toward the light.

The Simbul had cast a spell on Zandilar's Dancer. There was no other way the colt would have stayed inside the wide and glowing circle she'd made in the center of the fenced-in yard. But magic wasn't enough to keep Dancer calm or convince him that the Simbul was trustworthy. He reared when she tried to reclaim his dangling halter rope.

Bro watched the colt he'd raised from birth straighten his neck and sink onto his haunches. He knew as surely as he knew his own name that Dancer was going to bolt and that breaking a wizard's circle was certain death or worse. With waving arms and a banshee wail, Bro raced toward the colt.

He felt his hair rise like cat's fur as he leapt over the glowing line. It seemed as if countless hot thorns had pierced his skin, but Bro kept his balance when his feet touched down inside the circle. He lunged for the halter rope then hung on for dear life when the Simbul shouted his name and Zandilar's Dancer reared for the sun.

* * * * *

Alassra spread her arms in a desperate attempt to control the spell the boy's sudden appearance within her circle had disrupted. She almost had the magic in balance when his sister followed him across the line. The spell was ripe. Either it carried them away or it killed them. She seized the boy with her left hand and the girl with her right, then let it fly.

There were foggy cracks in time and space around them long enough for Alassra to count to ten—twice as long as she considered prudent. There were dangers between here and there that couldn't be ignored—which meant she didn't know where they were headed, except it wasn't Velprintalar. That meant more spells unreeled from her memory to insure that they hovered a moment in breathable air when the fog dissipated.

The boy, naturally, chose that moment to wrest free, taking the colt with him. They hit the ground running . . . through faint moonlight. . . into dark, thick trees. Alassra put a quick stop to their escape with a bit of crystal and a word that

froze both in midstride, then she lowered herself and the girl to the ground.

A tangle of branches hid the sky. "Trees and moonlight! Cold tea and crumpets! Where are we? When are we?"

A moment's concentration and, stars or no stars, the Simbul had one answer: The Yuirwood. The forest's ancient magic pressed against all her senses. The trees tolerated her presence among them; they did not welcome her. Respectfully, Alassra made herself small and inconspicuous, though not before she cast one last spell above the living canopy. The stars of summer were in the sky, each one subtly displaced.

The principles of movement through time were the same as those through space—every traveling spell required a bit of both. But to move herself, two children and a horse far enough through time that the stars were displaced should have been—after her skirmish with the Red Wizards—temporarily beyond her abilities.

"Damned odd," she muttered, puzzled but not concerned.

In six centuries of wizardry, Alassra had survived far worse than a misdirected traveling spell, though usually it took more than children and domestic animals to confound her. The horse, she knew, was more than it appeared to be, hence her interest in it, but it remained a horse, neither help nor hindrance where magic was concerned. The little girl, whose hand Alassra still held, didn't know her own name, much less where they were; she hadn't played a role in bringing them here.

That left Bro, the half-elf—Ebroin of MightyTree, to give him the Cha'Tel'Quessir name she'd plucked from his thoughts and the lineage she read from the beads strung around his neck. They'd come to rest in his native place. Bro was as overwhelmed as his sister, but far from empty-minded. In the two years Alassra had been watching him and his colt, he'd shown no magical bent, either for wizardry or the forest magic of his ancestors but this wouldn't be the first time

shock had kindled latent talent. Poised on the verge of manhood, he was the right age for a sudden awakening.

Mindful of the forest's interest, Alassra gently touched his brow. The echoes were very faint; the talent not much greater. Bro hadn't cast a spell. That was some relief: Faerun didn't need an untrained druid with the power to pull Mystra's Chosen through time. He'd intended to cause trouble, and he'd achieved his goal. She found she liked him better than when she'd known him only through the mirror.

"I'll have to leave you here," she said as she lifted her spell from his limbs. "Even the witch-queen has her limits."

Bro drew a free breath and clasped his hands around Alassra's throat.

"You killed them!" he cried. "You could have saved them, but you didn't. You let them die—my mother, Dent, the whole of Sulalk—and then you tried to steal Dancer!"

He was no threat, not to the likes of her. The challenge lay in not killing him when she flung him aside. He landed hard, ten paces away, and for a moment Alassra thought she'd failed. Then Bro hauled himself to his feet and attacked again.

"Be still!" she commanded, lofting another little crystal into the air. He froze and, like an unbalanced statue, toppled face-first to the ground. "You're determined to make this difficult for both of us, aren't you?"

The city of Bezantur, in Thay
Mid-afternoon, the fourteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of
the Banner (1368DR)

The tide was out and a stiff wind, running ahead of a sea storm, swept over the harbor mud, absorbing scents of life and death. On land, smoke from countless ovens gave the wind texture, while sun-baked streets and fermenting middens added their offerings to the season known in Bezantur as Reeking Heat.

Those who could flee the city had left a month ago; those who could not—the poor and the powerful—endured. A perverse few claimed preference for air with a life of its own, but most suffered the stifling, pungent breezes with little grace. Perfumers did better trade than food sellers as everyone created a private aura, using one favored scent against a myriad of others. In the end, stale perfume became the worst stench of all.

The state room of the Black Citadel at Bezantur's heart smelt as bad as the meanest alley. Aznar Thrul, Zulkir of Invocation and Tharchion of the Priador—the newest Thayan province of which ancient Bezantur had become the capital—fought Reeking Heat with incense cauldrons and fans: strategies Bezantines had long abandoned. Heavy smoke attracted other aromas, which the fans plastered over every surface. A decade into his tharchionate and Thrul's laudatory murals were reduced to obscure blotches, and the ceiling was a greasy stain where swarms of insects made their homes.

Thrul's nature, infinitely adaptable in politics and deceit, did not allow him to admit an error in ordinary housekeeping. By his order, the cauldrons were kept full and cindering; the fans never stopped swaying. He surrounded himself with the most priceless perfume of all: crisp air invoked from a distant mountaintop. Clothed in heavy velvet, the Zulkir sat on his throne while sweating petitioners paraded before him. Sultry heat and foul air weren't all that made the Byzantine

petitioners uncomfortable. Life was dangerous for a Thayan zulkir who accumulated enemies as the ceiling above him accumulated flies, doubly dangerous for a zulkir who was also a territorial tharchion. Death threats were routine; some were serious. Thrul took no unnecessary chances: when petitioners came to the state room, they entered it naked. Conventional weapons were impossible to conceal, and it was a rare mage whose concentration was not addled by embarrassment. Shame was further compounded by the constant presence of the citadel's legion of slaves. Never mind that the slaves were equally unclothed or that most of them were undead: They had eyes, they stared, and there was always the chance that they might recognize or remember.

There were drawbacks: Unnerved petitioners were often incoherent. It took patience to understand their logic, and Aznar Thrul was not a patient man. He'd have foregone these bribe-heavy occasions entirely were it not useful, even in Thay, for a tharchion to hear the complaints of common folk at least once a season—or twice, in Reeking Heat.

Thrul saw a score of petitioners before the storm swept in; twenty-three, if he counted the three who fainted between the door and the front of his chair. Once the storm arrived, thunder made it too difficult to hear, and wind whipping through the unshuttered windows blew embers from the incense cauldrons to the ceiling where the greasy soot caught fire.

Lesser wizards levitated slaves with damp rags to beat out the blaze. Two slaves burned when the flames ignited their undead flesh. Another four were lost when the wizard who held them in the air was distracted by a particularly loud thunder blast. The confusion and cleanup delayed the zulkir's dinner well into the evening. He was in a foul mood when his chamberlain appeared in the doorway.

"Neema Gaz," the blue-tattooed wizard announced. A ragged kilt hung around his waist, a mark of the favor he

risked by interrupting Thrul as he ate. Warily, he placed a carnelian brooch on the table. "I do not know her, O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir, but she had this." He pointed at the brooch, the token of a wizard whose rank was considerably higher than his own. "She says she will not leave without seeing you, O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir. I would dispose of her, but. . ." He shrugged. "If I failed, and she burst in here unannounced, you would be even more displeased."

The zulkir, still robed in velvet and surrounded by mountain air, set down his soup spoon with elegance and drama. He rolled his eyes in frustration or possibly the start of an invocation that would consign the chamberlain to the citadel's legions of undead soldiers. The chamberlain, assuming the latter, folded his arms in prayer.

Thrul chortled. He seized the brooch, breaking the wards around him. Candle flames flickered briefly in a cool breeze, then sultry calm was restored as the zulkir rubbed the dark red gemstone between his fingers.

"Give her what she wants, then send her in ... alone."

"O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir, she wants—"

"I know what she wants, lead-head. Assist her!"

The chamberlain wisely foreswore further argument. Shortly thereafter—when the soup tureen had been carried away and the main course laid in its place—a woman entered the room . . . alone, according to the zulkir's command.

She was a tall human, slender but at least a decade past her prime. Sinuous tattoos in shades of blue and green wound from her scalp to her toes; weathered wrinkles cut across the tattoos, especially where she'd singed away her hair years earlier. Her breasts, visible beneath a loose gown of bleached gauze, had begun to wither—hardly the sort of companion Thrul chose when companionship was on his mind, yet he poured a goblet of wine for her and pointed toward the wall where a three-legged stool waited for those privileged enough to sit in a zulkir and tharchion's presence.

Neema Gaz took the goblet, declined the stool.

"I was not expecting you."

"I'd have failed you, my lord, if you were."

Thrul slid the brooch across the table. When she picked it up, the pocket of mountain air expanded to surround her as well. He watched her closely—he'd never honored her in this way before—but if she was surprised or flattered, he could not detect it. Then again, a spy-master whose thoughts could be read by an amateur wasn't worth his gold. Thrul's own thoughts were duly protected by his robe, which was constructed of spells and velvet. No one, not even the great Szass Tam himself, could probe his mind while he wore it.

"If you have not failed me, then why have you come?"

The spy master studied her brooch a moment before fastening it to her flimsy robe. "Messages, my lord, from the west. There was a problem."

She paused, met Thrul's eyes, finding the precise balance between honesty and pride necessary to survive in the tight circle of associates around any zulkir or tharchion. Thrul lowered his gaze first; she continued.

"A woman in Nethra. She let her guard down and drew unwanted attention, but everything's been taken care of, my lord. There'll be no repetition. The web wasn't compromised."

"Why tell me of your mistakes, woman?" Thrul's scowl took a cruel turn. "I'm not interested in mistakes."

"The woman was a fool, my lord, and we're well rid of her, but she was looking under a very interesting rock when the Tall One interrupted her."

"Tall One? You mean the Aerasume?" the zulkir's tone was frigid. "What trade do the Aerasume have in Nethra?"

"That is not known, my lord. The Tall One took ship immediately after the incident. We looked for his associates but. . . My lord, pursuing one of them is hardly worth the risk. Whatever his reason for visiting Nethra, he's gone now. I will tell you if he returns. That is not why I've come."

"Yes, and why, precisely, have you come?"

"We are not the only fishers with a net to fling over Aglarond."

Aznar Thrul, who shaved his scalp and beard daily but left his eyebrows intact, raised both of them to astonished heights. "Who else? Allies? Enemies?" He paused after each question, but his spy master did not respond. "Zulkirs?" he asked finally. "Who? Toward what ends?"

"Enchantment no longer relies on our advice. He's put his own hand on the map."

"Lauzoril," the zulkir drawled, wrapping his voice around the name as he considered his ally of convenience—inconvenience—against Szass Tam. The man gave lip service to the notions of Thay's imperial destiny, but he was an opportunist, a coward in his gut, like so many enchanter. What Lauzoril knew of strategy and tactics could be written on the back of a woman's hand, but he had a golden tongue. No gnolls and goblins, undead or unclever, for the Zulkir of Enchantment—the man could raise a human host and hold it together with words alone. He'd proved that last year in Gauros Gorge where he'd extracted his human legions safely from a battlefield rout and gained an undeserved reputation for martial genius. His popularity with the common folk—rare for a zulkir—made him useful... for now.

"Enchantment is an ally, a friend. I'm sure his spy gave a good account."

"The bastard unstrung himself, my lord."

Thrul sucked his teeth. The minions of Enchantment were uncommonly good at dying with their secrets intact. A more suspicious man than Aznar Thrul—if such a man were ever born—might suspect their zulkir of practicing forbidden magic or a bit of treachery with Szass Tam. In which case, woe to Necromancy—and Lauzoril was still more useful alive than destroyed.

"His schemes are known to us. Anyone else? My supper grows cold."

"Illusion has spies in Aglarond," the spy master said abruptly. "Mythrell'aa of the Serpent Tower."

Thrul lost his appetite. Lady Illusion had dwelt in Bezantur longer than him, but hadn't had the wit to leave when he claimed it. She'd locked herself in her obsidian tower and sealed the place with enough magic to make a god hesitate before knocking on her door.

Publicly, Mythrell'aa claimed she was no one's enemy, that Illusion had no ambition, and she wished only to follow her own path. Privately, Aznar Thrul knew her proclamations were trash. She'd declared for Szass Tam after last year's Rashemen Gorge rout, then undeclared when Tam himself was defeated in the spring. He believed the first declaration, not the second. Thrul was certain Lady Illusion had made new promises to Szass Tam; he had more than one spy master reporting to him. He was almost certain the two were conspiring against him directly.

Mythrell'aa wasn't useful, not at all. Thrul wanted her dead—if he could be certain death wouldn't simply make her even more dangerous. But. . .

"Mythrell'aa? She's got a grudge against the silver-eyed bitch, had it for years; no one knows why. But flinging out a net in greater Aglarond? That's hardly Illusion's style, woman, and you know it." Then another thought raced through the zulkir's mind. "Death's door—she's not spying on Aglarond, she's spying on us! If she's gotten wind of our web . . ."

The spy master nodded sagely. "We cannot not rule that out, my lord. I have not."

Thrul wondered, Had he made the greatest mistake of his life when he trusted this woman? Should he slay her on the spot and eliminate the possibility? By design, they kept secrets from each other. Thrul had other spies, other spy masters; that was one of his secrets. What were hers? She wasn't supposed to spy within Thay, especially within Bezantur, but she'd be a fool if she didn't. She'd be a fool if she didn't

have eyes and ears within Serpent Tower—if she hadn't at least tried to place a spy there. Thrul's gods knew, Thrul himself had tried often enough. Was his spy master luckier? more skilled? Or a traitor? Did he dare trust her? Did he dare not?

"My lord? You are distracted."

The zulkir shook his head and prepared a lie. "We have invested so much in this web. I would be grieved if Mythrell'aa had compromised it before it had truly begun to function."

"It is not compromised, my lord. Not at all. The woman we lost was in Nethra. She cannot be traced to us; that is the beauty of what we have created. And she's already been replaced. Mythrell'aa's web is in Aglarond proper, disguised as grain traders."

"Grain traders! Mythrell'aa?" Thrul snorted and took a drink from his goblet. "Surely, this is humor?"

"They have been on the roads since the spring mud dried, my lord, visiting village after village. They have paid handsomely for grain they do not want. . . There will be havoc, my lord, when the real traders arrive. Towns and cities will have to pay more, or face revolt. It is a clever ploy, my lord—one we might consider using—but from Mythrell'aa, it is pure chance. Her minions aren't looking for grain. We don't know what it might be, my lord, but we suspect they may have found it in a small village near Mesring."

"So? Why tell me this? Why bother me, if you don't have answers. What do I pay you for, woman? Questions? Suspensions?"

The spy master squared her shoulders. She came from unquestionable Mulan stock and when she straightened her back she towered over the seated zulkir. "My suspicions are answers, my lord. They are the currency of my trade. If they no longer satisfy you . . ."

Thrul met her eyes, weighed his options, and poured more

wine for them both. "Tell me your suspicions, woman. My curiosity can be contained no longer."

"This morning I learned that there are three wizards in that village, my lord, and three more outside it. The ones inside are of no account, but the others were recognizable. She's sent three of her best, my lord. Any one of them could turn that village into a memory, but she sent three—"

"Why? What could attract her? Who cares ... ?" Thrul's voice trailed. He answered his own question: "The damned queen!" He cursed softly. "A trap to snare the queen in her own backyard. What if she succeeds?"

The spy master grinned. "No one will know it was her, my lord. Our own wizards have surrounded the village and the illusionists. They won't make the first move, but they'll make the last."

The zulkir saluted his spy master with his goblet. "A rival, an enemy, and no risk to us, no matter what—correct?"

"Correct, my lord. If Mythrell'aa fails, you will be there to humiliate her. If she wins, you, my lord, will be the first to claim Aglarond for Thay."

"The rewards are indeed incalculable." Thrul set down his goblet. "What part of them will you claim for yourself, woman?"

"Who am I, my lord, but your spy master? Will you need me any less tomorrow than you need me today? I want nothing I do not already have—"

"Wisely said, wo—"

"But I need gold, my lord."

"Debts?" Thrul asked eagerly, thinking he'd discovered her weakness.

"Replacements, my lord. Mythrell'aa is a fool, but there will be casualties. Faces will have been seen and must, therefore, be eliminated. The entire web will have to be realigned, holes will need filling—six of them, I think. Not for Aglarond, my lord; that's no place for raw recruits. I send veterans to Aglarond, my lord, but I... we protect them."

The spy master had researched the spells that concealed their spies from the closest scrutiny, but the casting was beyond her. Not beyond a zulkir, of course. He set the spell in an oily potion that she delivered to her chosen agents. He added a few reagents, a few hidden consequences that she didn't know about. It was a fair trade, for Thay.

"I'll instruct my chamberlain to purchase blood pearls and dragon-wing powder."

"I prefer to purchase them myself, my lord."

Another exchange of stares and the zulkir appeared to concede the point. "Of course. My chamberlain will fill your purse."

"I will return, my lord, when I have learned more."

The zulkir dismissed his spy master with a nod. She left the room. Thrul's chamberlain met her in a deserted atrium. He returned her clothing and, after she had dressed, handed her a coin purse. There'd been enough time—barely—for the chamberlain to meet with the zulkir. More likely, the chamberlain's mind was not entirely his own.

She changed her clothes a second time in a bolt-hole not far from the tharchion's citadel. When she emerged her wizard's tattoos were hidden beneath a mane of scraggly hair and padded rags had given her an old woman's humped shoulders. She hobbled along with a cane that was too short by half for her natural height and attracted no one's attention as she completed her homeward journey.

In the paid-for privacy of her room, she tested each coin in the heat of a blue-green flame. In her line of work, a person couldn't be too careful. Her neighbors and associates wouldn't accept an ensorcelled coin at face value, but they'd pay extra for anything that would draw Aznar Thrul's attention to an enemy.

Two of the lot glowed yellow in the flame. She set them aside with a sigh. There were more tests to run but not tonight. She poured herself a glass of clear liquid and downed it in a single gulp. Tears flowed from her eyes.

"Oh, Deaizul—you'd better be right about this," she warned the walls.

Deaizul was in Aglarond. Deaizul had been the man who'd tracked Mythrell'aa's spies to the little village, the man who'd told her what he'd found and summoned up the necessary assistance before he'd sent the message, the man who'd taught her everything he knew about spycraft and how to keep the upper hand with men like Aznar Thrul.

She removed the carnelian brooch—Deaizul's last gift and the token through which she'd claimed a place in Thrul's inmost circle—from the inner folds of her rags and set it on the table beside the coins.

Deaizul had lost his nerve during the Salamander Wars. Her mentor worked alone now or he didn't work at all. He'd left the village after he sent the message. The village, he'd said, had given him a missing piece to another mystery, set deep in the Yuirwood: gods in search of worshipers, would-be worshipers in search of gods. Deaizul had a plan, he'd said, to bring the worshipers and the gods together—for the greater glory of Thay. He'd have to become someone else for awhile, but he'd done that a hundred times before. Deaizul could live another man's life for a week, a month, or a year, and his own wife would never suspect.

When he was done, he said he'd come back to Thay and the zulkirs would be like mud on his feet.

Just don't count on him for anything until then. Deaizul in disguise often forgot who Deaizul was or who in Bezantur worried about him each night.

6

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond
Night, out of time, out of place

"Are you finished?" the Simbul demanded. "Are you ready to behave like an intelligent man?" She thumped her staff on the ground beside Bro's head. "Or, are you going to continue behaving like a complete fool?"

Bro tried to sit but fell back with a groan, clutching his

flanks, hiding his face. His shoulders shook and something like a sob slipped into the night.

Alassra prodded his ankle. He curled into a tight ball of misery. Alassra craned her neck to see if he was bleeding. She'd hit him harder than she meant to. Possibly—probably—she'd broken a few ribs.

"Answer me, Ebroin."

It hadn't been an even fight: Bro's anger was no match for her skill, even with the unfamiliar staff she passed to her off-weapon hand. He needed healing again. She'd healed him once, back in his village. When she'd shot lightning at the Red Wizard sneaking toward them, the half-elf had gotten a flash burn. It hadn't been a serious injury, but the queen of Aglarond took some pride that she didn't harm her subjects—when they gave her a choice.

Which Bro hadn't.

The troublesome youth had attacked her four times, not counting his initial plunge into the Simbul's spellcasting periphery as she prepared to whisk the colt to safety in Velprintalar, fully intending to return for him and his sister. She'd gone to Sulalk prepared for spell-flinging wizards, not grief-maddened Cha'Tel'Quessir. Alassra knew three-score variations on the simple spells for sleep and tranquillity, but she hadn't foreseen a need for such gentle magic and, notwithstanding the shelves of worn spellbooks in her workroom, there was an absolute limit to the number of spells she could retain in her mind.

The first two times he'd attacked, she'd quenched his rage with paralysis, the least of the wizardly arsenal she'd brought to the village. After that, Alassra had cast her last paralysis spells on the little girl and the colt—lest they compound her problems—and beaten him into submission with her staff.

She could—and feared she might have to—pound the youth to death's threshold with her staff, then heal him back to health several times more.

"Ebroin, this grows tiresome. I have more important concerns."

He got one arm braced and levered himself into a weary, bleeding crouch. His eyes were narrow when he raised his head, but Alassra thought he'd learned his lesson. She took a step backward, to show she meant no further harm.

"Your gods' curse on you, Queen of Aglarond," the youth swore—the precise, formal oath of a deep forest Cha'Tel'Quessir and language Aglarond's human queen didn't want to hear when she was standing in the Yuirwood in a time other than her own. "Your gods' curse on you," Bro repeated, "for a murderer and a thief."

Alassra could hear the trees growing eyes and ears. She'd slain many men for lesser insults but this time she remained calm . . . relatively calm for a woman who'd been nicknamed the storm queen long before she took possession of Aglarond's throne.

"Murderer? Murderer! The Red Wizards are murderers, Ebroin. They murdered your mother and stepfather." She'd pieced that much of his history together from his other curses. "If I hadn't been there, you'd be dead, and your little sister as well."

"If you hadn't been there to steal Zandilar's Dancer, neither would they."

"I had—I have no intention of stealing your colt, Ebroin. You'll be handsomely paid, in gold."

"He's not for sale! I was going to—" Bro stopped in mid-thought. Anger drained from his bruised face, leaving grief behind.

"You were going to what?" Alassra asked, sensing that she might not have to strike him again. "What were you going to do?"

Bro had collapsed while she asked her questions. His forehead rested in his fingers and his knuckles rested on the leaf-covered ground. Alassra knelt beside him. Compassion was not the Simbul's greatest strength. The Rashemaar

witches who'd raised her considered it a luxury. Her own temperament regarded it with suspicion—as the youth might. They certainly shared a tendency toward stubbornness.

"Did you have an argument with your parents?" she asked.

He shook his head; whatever haunted him, it was worse—in his conscience—than a quarrel-opened breach that could never be repaired.

"The past is past, Ebroin, There's no going back to this morning."

Never mind that they were displaced backward in the world's time, it was the mind and body's time that mattered. The spells locked in Alassra's staff could take them almost anywhere, but they'd arrive there the exact same number of moments after her miscast Sulalk spell as they'd lived out of time in the Yuirwood. There'd be no detours to another morning, no second chances. The gods were very strict about such things, and Mystra's Chosen— especially her Chosen—were bound by the gods' rules.

"You have to face the future, Ebroin. We all do, regardless of our mistakes. Your parents and village will be avenged, I promise you. Ten Red Wizards will die for every villager— twice ten for your parents. They will not be forgotten. And neither will you. You and your sister may come to Velprintalar, to the Verdigris Palace."

Bro raised his head. Alassra thought they were making progress.

"Never!"

"There's nothing left for you in Sulalk. A village needs more than one farmer."

"I'm not a farmer!"

Bro's voice was raw and sharp enough to cut rope. Through sheer luck, Alassra had found the key. Silent tears rinsed dirt from the youth's face.

"I'm not a farmer. I wasn't going to stay with them. I was going to run away, back to the Yuirwood. I didn't want to

hurt my mother; I knew I would when I left, but I didn't want to. She was happy with Dent; happy in a different way than she'd been in the Yuirwood. Rizcarn . . . My father ... I wanted another way. I prayed ... I prayed to Zandilar for a way out of Sulalk that wouldn't break her heart, but not like this. Not with her being dead. I didn't pray for this to happen."

It was natural to want to comfort him and natural for him to pull away. The Simbul got to her feet, scowling at the trees. So, the youth had prayed to Zandilar, the name she'd heard the night the colt was foaled.

Zandilar was mentioned only a handful of times in Elminster's vast library and not once in the Aglarondan archives. Alassra had checked every scroll and tome. All she knew for certain was that Zandilar was a Yuirwood goddess—possibly elven, possibly not—and that she hadn't been worshiped since the Cha'Tel'Quessir began to be born.

A breeze rustled through the treetops without touching the ground. Apart from the breeze, the forest was quiet—uncommonly, uncannily quiet. Alassra gave a thought for each of the spells she held in her mind, assuring herself that she was as prepared as she could be. She said her own prayer to her own goddess, Mystra.

Give me strength and wisdom . . . and safe passage to my own time and place!

The breeze died; not likely a coincidence. Alassra switched her staff to her weapon hand.

"If Zandilar is a goddess worthy of your worship," she said to Bro and any other ears that happened to listen, "then she did not answer your prayers with the death of your mother." Alassra left other possibilities unspoken, though her thoughts, which a goddess might overhear, warned that gods who tormented their worshipers were not welcome in her Aglarond.

Bro's tense, silent body spoke eloquently. He wanted to be free from unbearable guilt but he couldn't accept comfort from his queen. Alassra shook her head. The youth was

stubborn; give him another six hundred years and he might be as stubborn as her.

"Try to understand, Ebroin," Alassra said coldly, because cold sometimes worked best with difficult people—or so Elminster claimed.

She bent down to touch his arm. He flinched, but the Simbul's reflexes were lightning fast, and she'd spilled a vial of healing unguent on his skin before he got away. With a pale aura shimmering around him, the time was ripe for brutal honesty.

"Your life has been seized by forces beyond your control, Ebroin. It will never be the same as it was or would have been. Blame me, if you must, though the true fault lies in Thay's malice. They will feel my wrath for this, I promise you. But above all, don't blame yourself. You hadn't the power to shape this day, and you haven't the strength to bear responsibility for it."

The spell's aura faded. Bro's bones and flesh were whole again. His mind and spirit were another matter. Alassra's grimoires contained spells to lift a man's emotional burdens though a hundred years had passed since she'd cast even one of them. Magic couldn't salve a guilty conscience, not without leaving something much worse in its place.

"Are you ready to get on with your life?"

Bro planted one foot beside the other and pushed himself cautiously upright, as if he didn't trust the power of magic to restore him. His fingers probed his flank; then he brushed the back of his hand across his mouth. Flakes of dried blood fell away. The lips beneath were whole and unswollen.

"I hate you," Bro swore softly, but stayed where he was. He swept tangled hair away from his eyes and studied their surroundings as if he hadn't noticed them before. His hands shriveled into fists when he saw the horse and his sister both sprawled on the moonlit ground. "What—?"

The Simbul spun her staff, aiming the metal-wrapped butt squarely at his heart before he could take a stride toward

them or her. "They're resting—until we settle matters between us. Have we settled matters between us?"

Bro shook his head. "I can't. Don't hurt them, please? It's not their fault."

Alassra lowered her staff. "I won't—"

But before she could finish her assurances an angry yowl broke through the trees to her right. Alassra couldn't match the sound to any creature she knew, in itself a cause for concern. Gut instinct advised that it was large, predatory, and on the prowl.

"Behind me!" the Simbul ordered as she quenched the light spell.

Bro came to Alassra's side and would have gotten in front of her if she hadn't grabbed his arm.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"I don't know. Be quiet, and get behind me!"

He stayed put and Alassra let him be, lest he do something more foolish. Fingerlike clouds reached across the Yuirwood, making shadows with the moonlight. The breeze had returned, stirring treetops, adding shadows to shadows and making it difficult to hear the small sounds Alassra needed to hear. The purely human senses she'd inherited from her father were strained to their utmost and failing.

Alassra withdrew a delicate knife from a sheath strapped above her wrist. She kissed the blade once then squeezed it within her fist.

The knife was a gift from her younger sister, Qilue Eresseae, who'd been born drow, not human, and who was Chosen by both Mystra and the drow goddess, Eilistraee. The elven metal with its swirling patterns was a marvel that never required sharpening. Its edge, however, was the least of its virtues. Awakened by a sister's kiss and a taste of her blood, the knife bestowed elven senses until the wound closed.

In a heartbeat, Alassra saw the Yuirwood with the fire-etched sight of those who dwelt in the Underdark. Shadows gave way to glowing tree trunks and flickering leaves. Bro, when

she glanced toward him, was the image of his milk-name, Ember. The knife's effect on Alassra's other senses was less profound. Human ears might have heard twigs snapping in the distance, but not as clearly as an elf's ... or half-elf's. Bro surged forward. Alassra dropped the knife. She seized his sleeve with her bleeding hand.

"Don't be a fool!"

His eyes widened and disappeared—a trick of elven sight where warmth was brightness and eyes were both cool and dark—but he held his ground until the creature yowled again. It was closer now and there was no mistaking its size or intent: something resembling a tall torch flickered in the trees. A spark of sense finally kindled in Bro's thoughts: He went to ground behind his queen.

Alassra allowed herself a smile then turned her attention back to the forest. The creature concealed its shape among the trees, either the natural canniness of a predatory animal or the far-more-dangerous mark of true intelligence. As before, Alassra touched her memorized spells and the gifts Mystra gave her Chosen.

The Chosen weren't indestructible—Alassra's eldest sister had died defending Shadowdale from a maddened dragon only a few years ago. Sylune willingly sacrificed her life; she'd had the power to save herself. Her choice had saved hundreds, maybe thousands, of Shadowdale-men's lives when there was no other way to save them, and Sylune hadn't died an ordinary death: She'd become a spectral harper, learning to make new kinds of music. Even so, Alassra hadn't made peace with her sister's sacrifice. She wasn't about to make a similar choice, not for two children, however good and innocent, and an odd-colored horse.

"Just go away," she whispered to the creature in the trees. There was magic in her voice, a simple cantrip, effective with animals and small children. "There's nothing here for you."

Another yowl confirmed Alassra's worst fears: the creature

had the wit to perceive magic. For a moment she saw it striding manlike among the trees with a broad, powerful trunk, long, rooty fingers, and burning eyes. She couldn't yet give it a name, but it had roused a memory. Rashemaar witches, each with a masked face, crowded Alassra's thoughts.

The forest is not ours, they reminded her. The forest was here before us and must be here when we are gone. The forest has had its own protector from the beginning. Woe betide us, if we fail to protect the forest.

Every day, then and now, the witches left offerings for the Old Man, the forest's first and most powerful protector. Alassra's guardians had never seen the Old Man and prayed they never would, but they described him as a giant, both manlike and treelike. Aside from size—the creature before her was no giant—it and the Old Man seemed the same.

As a child Alassra had pestered her guardians: Did the Old Man protect every forest in Faerun, or only theirs? If he protected every forest, how did he get from one forest to another? If he protected only theirs, was every other forest unprotected? The witches had an answer for her questions: hours and hours of tedious labor carding wool or churning butter until she'd learned to keep her curiosity to herself.

Old questions returned. The Cha'Tel'Quessir were the Yuirwood's living protectors, but the half-elves weren't the first. Full-blooded elves had dwelt in the forest before them and the elves' own mythology held that another world, far removed from Abeir-toril, was their birth-home.

The creature yowled again. He circled their clearing. Every few steps he swung his arms and a tree shattered as if lightning-struck. According to the stories Alassra remembered, when the Old Man appeared, uprooting and shattering the trees he otherwise protected, the witches brewed special offerings of herbs and honey, then the eldest witch, the wisest and most revered of their never-large number, would take the offering into the forest, a journey

from which she never returned.

"Nonsense," the Simbul muttered. She'd concede that offerings and sacrifices had their place, but only after a more direct approach had been tried and failed. "We mean no harm to you or your forest," she shouted, and kindled her own lightning.

"It's not listening," Bro advised from last year's crumbled leaves.

"You know what it is?"

He might. He was Cha'Tel'Quessir, and even those who served her loyally kept secrets from humans.

"No. I just... I just know it's not listening. I hear it not listening."

A talent for misdirecting teleport spells and hearing a silence. Ebroin would bear closer examination when this was over. Until then ...

"If it's not listening, then we'll have to get its attention."

The Simbul extended her arm. The air burned with a sour smell. Her hair whipped around her, although there was no wind. In the lull between two heartbeats, lightning unfurled from her fingertips, loud enough to deafen, bright enough to blind her drow-gift senses.

Alassra recovered quickly. She watched the creature beat its breast, heard it shake the forest with a roar. Then it raised its arms in a gesture she knew all too well. Without hesitation, she loosed another spell: not lightning, but a gout of storm-tossed water that swerved between the trees. In other times, other places, Alassra had destroyed a stone fortress with a similar spell. She expected less in the Yuirwood, where the forest's own magic dampened great spells, and was satisfied when the watery fist pelted the creature solidly in the chest, fizzling its spell, and driving it into the night.

Bro expressed his admiration with an awestruck gasp.

"Can I trust you now, Ebroin?" she asked. "It will come back, maybe with its friends and relations. We don't have much time."

Suddenly they had much less time, or much more. The creature had been part of the mischance that had brought them to this wayward time. Its departure untied a magical mooring rope, and now they were adrift in currents between past and future.

It was a new experience for the Simbul: travel spells lifted a person above the temporal stream and blocked awareness of time's passage. If she'd been alone, she would have savored the novelty, even the danger. But she wasn't alone. Kneeling down, Alassra got one hand on Bro's arm and laid her other arm across the colt's neck.

"Grab your sister! Don't let go!" she commanded, and this time Bro obeyed.

The colt and the little girl both shed her spells when the hand-to-hand link was complete. The girl shrieked and the colt lurched awkwardly to its feet. The Simbul dropped her staff—it was bound to her by a score of spells and would stay with her through any errant magic—and seized the colt's halter.

Zandilar's Dancer had Alassra outweighed and out-muscled. She bitterly regretted that she'd used the last of her mild magic dealing with Bro's temper. With the colt awake and panicked and her without the spells to quiet him, the best Alassra could do was keep his head level as he dragged them all through an eerie, changing forest.

"I can hold him," Bro insisted after they narrowly avoided a tree that began as a shadow and grew to maturity in half a step. "He'll trust me."

It went against the Simbul's judgment, but her way wasn't working. Alassra exchanged her firm grip on Bro's sleeve for a gentler hold on his sister's hand. Zandilar's Dancer was too spooked to trust anyone, but a second strong hand on his halter convinced him to stand still.

"What happened?" Bro asked when several moments passed without changes in the trees around them.

Zandilar's Dancer had pulled them a hundred paces from

the clearing and who-knew-how-many years. More than she wanted to count. It was still night, still the Yuirwood. The forest had changed around them, but the trees had grown, not shrunk.

"We're back where we belong."

"Back?" he asked, as if he'd understood nothing.

"We were dis—"

The Yuirwood burst into flames around them. For a moment—an eternal and terrifying moment—Alassra knew she was on fire, then the moment and the fire were behind her. She was alone, blind, numbly aware of her arms or legs, but not the cloth of her gown or the leather of her boots. Her mind was clear and empty. Every spell the Simbul had studied in Velprintalar had been burned out of her memory: Another new experience that she hoped not to repeat.

Empty-headed as she was, Alassra remained far from helpless. Mystra's Chosen were never helpless: The goddess's protection flowed in their veins. Alassra's senses, except for the forgotten spells, restored themselves. She assessed her injuries and analyzed the events that had overtaken her.

She'd been wrong to tell Bro they were back where they belonged. They'd merely arrived in a time and place where the Yuirwood had seemed changeless—until a forest fire swept through it. The flames had stunned her, but whatever magic had carried them through time, had carried them too rapidly for the fire to harm them.

To harm her.

Alassra opened her eyes, hoping that her more fragile companions had survived.

They had.

The half-elf, his half-sister, and the colt lay on the nearby ground, lit by stars and moonlight that seemed—Alassra narrowed her eyes to study their positions—where they should be a few hours before dawn on the second day after her six hundred and second birthday. Smoke and soot clung

to their clothes, but they were alive and, like her, unhurt. Her staff lay beside the colt. She picked it up and with a fingertip gesture brought a globe of cool light to its gnarled head. Wood, thanks be to Mystra, couldn't be stunned, couldn't forget the spells bound within it.

Propping the staff against a tree-trunk, Alassra made a closer examination of her companions. When she was satisfied that her initial assumptions were accurate, she touched Bro's arm lightly.

He came awake with a jolt. "Fire! Fire! The cottage—"

"Not here. Not now."

Wide-eyed and not breathing, Bro stared at her, stared beyond her, seeing things Alassra wished he could forget. Finally his ribs heaved.

"Tay-Fay?"

"Behind you. Zandilar's Dancer, too. They've had a shock—too many shocks for one day and night—but they're safe."

Bro started to say something, thought better of it, and shook his head instead.

"Try to rest. I'm going to hie myself back to Velprintalar for a little while—just a little while. Do you understand how magic works, Ebroin? Even storm queens have their limits. I've got a spell or two left that would get us all home before the sun comes up, but it would be a rough ride for you, your sister and the horse. Easier and better if I go alone and come back when I can give you gentler passage."

He raised his head. The eyes that were so bleak and distant a moment ago, were lively now, glancing from the colt to the trees. Alassra knew, without magic's aid, exactly what the youth was thinking.

"Will you take Taefaeli with you now, please?" Bro asked.

It was the Simbul's turn to stare at the trees. The colt was a puzzle she wanted to solve, the means—the birthday gift—to lure Elminster to her privy chambers, but her wants paled beside Bro's needs. Zandilar's Dancer was the youth's only link to his past and to the Yuirwood itself. He'd said it

himself: he wasn't a farmer and it was a rare Cha'Tel'Quessir who truly enjoyed city life.

"I'll come back at sunset. You'll be here, won't you, Ebroin?"

"Take Taefaeli, please."

"I don't know. It will be a strain, but I suppose I can take her now. Better she wakes up in a strange bed than a strange forest?"

If Elminster had been there, or any of her sisters, especially Alustriel, they would have warned Bro that his secrets were exposed, but as it was, the youth had no advisors and walked calmly down the path Alassra prepared for him.

"She likes honey on her porridge."

"Honey and porridge, when she wakes up. But what about you, Ebroin? Will you be all right. . . until sundown?"

"This is the Yuirwood and I'm Cha'Tel'Quessir."

"Cha'Tel'Quessir with no knife in his belt or boots on his feet."

The youth's attention dropped to the ground and stayed there with his mouth open and his fingers splayed in panic. Alassra thought he'd lost his shoes during their time-trek, then she remembered his bare feet in the Sulalk stable.

"I'm sorry."

Bro didn't notice the Simbul's very rare apology. "The stream," he muttered. "Oh gods, my boots are still beside the stream."

"Take mine," Alassra said quickly. "Don't worry, they'll fit: I've got huge feet." She undid the thongs and kicked free of the leather. "And a knife." She opened her belt and removed the first of several sheaths.

The sheath held a plain dagger with a brass-studded hilt and a single-edged blade. A peddler had given it to her after she rescued his donkey from a muddy ravine. Short of the donkey, it was the man's most valuable possession, so she'd kept it, as she kept many things, until she found better homes for them. It could neutralize most poisons on contact and deflect simple spells; but the Simbul could neutralize

any poison and her ability to deflect magic was second to none.

She gave it to Bro along with a single strand of her silver hair, which she tied around his wrist. "I know you'll be here at sunset. I'll bring you better clothes and a more useful knife. But if you need me here before then, squeeze the knot and say my name. I'll hear you; I'll be here before you take your next breath." He looked doubtful, ready to break the strand and run for the trees immediately. "Think of your sister, Ebroin. You wouldn't want me to tell her that I'd left you here, alone, and something bad had happened to you." Bro swallowed hard. He slid the knife onto his belt and left the hair alone. "Take care of her."

"Peace between us, Ebroin?" Alassra offered her hand.

He shook his head. "Just take good care of her. Don't let her forget that her mother was Cha'Tel'Quessir."

"I won't."

Alassra retrieved her staff and the child. She smiled at Bro, who turned away, and reached within herself. Finding the source of Mystra's blessing—the silver fire of the Chosen—she let it take her and the child back to her privy chambers.

7

The city of Bezantur, in Thay

Between midnight and dawn, the fifteenth day of Eleasias,
The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Fine ash and cinders, black as the starless Bezantur sky visible through arrow slit windows, trickled through the elegant fingers of Mythrell'aa Vianul, Zulkir of Illusion, mistress of Serpent Tower. The sparkling powder fell into a crystal bowl, already knuckle-deep in darkness. When her fist was empty, Mythrell'aa scooped another handful from a smoldering brazier. She whispered two words—the name of her antagonist—Alassra Shentrantra, and began again.

Mythrell'aa's bowl filled with the residue of incense and empty visions. The sky lightened to a bruised lavender. Her time for private pleasures faded with the night.

"Where are you?" Mythrell'aa's black-enameled fingernails scraped the bottom of the brazier and brought up a handful of glowing embers. "Not beyond my reach."

A statement of faith, not fact. Every zulkir knew the Simbul had mastered spells they could only dream of. She could vanish for months and reappear in the thick of battle, radiating fire and lightning, ambushing them when they had thought they had the advantage.

Mythrell'aa had a true advantage over her Thayan peers: an older name, a private quarrel, and a thorn stem, the last token of an ill-fated love, which Alassra Shentrantra had unexpectedly preserved in her most private chamber.

"Come home, Alassra," Mythrell'aa wished as she shook the embers like dice in her loosely clenched fist. Blood-red lips parted in an eager smile. Yesterday, two years of scrying and spying had been fulfilled when Alassra came face-to-face with Mythrell'aa's minions in a no-account Aglarondan village. It was almost too much to believe that her illusionists had achieved the penultimate victory, but as the day passed and Alassra failed to appear in her private chamber. ..

After decades of waiting, Mythrell'aa began to hope.

The spilling embers formed a shape, like wine in a transparent glass. Mythrell'aa's smile froze. Her breath escaped in an enraged gasp.

"A child!"

The dangling lump in Alassra's arms was unmistakable to anyone who could read fire and ash. Mythrell'aa's hand was empty. Alassra's glowing shape was complete and began to move above the bowl.

"A horse! You were looking for a gods-all-be-damned horse!"

The zulkir made a fist. "What else went wrong?"

She considered her imperiled illusionists by face and name. She'd taught each of them magic and more, but they were all expendable, when Alassra Shentrantra was the prey. Before they left Thay, Mythrell'aa had made certain they

knew none of her secrets. They couldn't betray her if they fell into the witch-queen's hands.

Intrigue was a dangerous game and a game she hadn't played until recently. Mythrell'aa's life had been simpler before the Salamander War, before Zulkir Aznar Thrul established himself as Tharchion Aznar Thrul here in Bezantur. Before all that, Mythrell'aa had maintained cozy relationships with Bezantur's tharchions. She handled the magic and kept herself amused; they handled the intrigue.

Thrul had changed all that. He had no need of her spell-casting talents and treated her like a child. No, worse than a child, he'd treated her like a slave, expecting her—who'd been a zulkir before he was born—to cater to his whims. So she'd turned to Szass Tam and he'd taught her . . . for a price.

But not even Szass Tam knew about Alassra Shentrantra: he hadn't asked; she hadn't told. It was the first lesson he'd taught her, and she'd learned it well. Someday Mythrell'aa imagined she'd reveal what she knew about the witch-queen of Aglarond. Until then, Mythrell'aa kept her secret to herself. Countless Red Wizards moldered in lonely graves because they'd underestimated the witch-queen's power. Illusion's zulkir wouldn't be among them.

Mythrell'aa turned away from the animated embers, to the narrow windows where a man stood, as if in a trance, his face to the horizon. The past and the future were beyond Mythrell'aa's control, but in the present, in this room, there was nothing about Alassra Shentrantra that couldn't be used to hurt someone.

"Lailomun. Lailomun, my pretty pet, come here."

Lailomun started when she called his name. He reached for the open window, encountered the wards and fell back, nursing his numbed hands.

He hadn't changed since Mythrell'aa surprised him that night, decades past, in the trysting room Alassra Shentrantra prepared for them. His handsome face remained

unmarked by time, except for a small bluish scar above his right brow, where Mythrell'aa's vengeance burrowed through his skull.

She hadn't changed him, not the way zulkirs usually changed the annoyances of their lives. Lailomun knew himself and recognized her: His thoughts, a mixture of hate and horror, were poetry written in wide eyes, flared nostrils and quivering lips. He said nothing. Lailomun hadn't spoken since Mythrell'aa brought him back to Serpent Tower, but that was his decision, an act of futile willfulness that delighted the zulkir each time she roused him.

"Come. I have something to show you."

Having failed with the window, Lailomun headed for the door. Mythrell'aa let him take a few strides, then dropped him to his knees with an effortless spell: They'd played this game countless times before.

"How many times must I tell you, my pet? You're mine. You'll never leave me again."

Lailomun froze—his will, again, not hers. He studied his surroundings with the wit that made him so attractive to experienced and mighty women. This morning, because she'd been disturbed and another experienced, mighty woman was the source, Mythrell'aa gave her one-time lover an extra heartbeat's contemplation before she tightened his chain again.

"Shall I drag you?"

He rose and came to her, proud and dignified in defeat. The zulkir could have procured his cooperation, as she did with her body servants, but she'd left Lailomun's nature intact and tampered with his memory instead. Whatever Lailomun had remembered when she extracted him from the trysting room he remembered still. After that moment, however, his memory held nothing. Each time Mythrell'aa called Lailomun, she awoke him from an open-eyed sleep that, from his crippled perspective, had begun in the trysting room. He'd remain alert for a little while, thinking his captivity had

just begun, dreading what lay ahead. Then, gradually he'd fall into a trance until she roused him again.

Mythrell'aa opened her arms above the ember images. "See who I've found."

Her voice was sweet and deadly. Lailomun knew better than to trust her, but he looked at the images and recognized his ladylove.

"See, my pet, she has a child. Not yours, is it? Surely it's too big, too old to be yours. You were together, what—two years? Less? That child must have a different father."

Lailomun was surprised. More than surprised, he was shocked. Where another man might have lost his voice, Mythrell'aa hoped, when his lips parted, that Lailomun might find his. He caught himself before he spoke a word.

"Always the same decision," Mythrell'aa said softly, a trace of affection in her voice. She reached up to caress Lailomun's cheek. He held his breath as her sharpened nails moved across his flesh.

"She never loved you, Lailomun, not as I loved you. I could show you more. I could show you Alassra Shentrantra in the arms of a score of men, I could reveal her naked in the lairs of beasts and demons. She's made a fool of you, Lailomun, used you up and thrown you aside."

The zulkir, who was head and shoulders shorter than Lailomun, retreated, the better to observe his reaction. But there was no reaction. Shock had shattered the man's fragile awareness. He'd become, again, a living statue. She could awaken him. He'd have no memory of these last moments. The game could be played and replayed until Lailomun's nerves frayed and he collapsed into a stupor from which even a zulkir could not arouse him.

"Lailomun. Lailomun, my pet. Pay attention to me."

Mythrell'aa had designed the perfect punishment for a wayward lover. The incantation she'd used to cripple his memory might have made her rich, if she'd needed more wealth or written down the spells she devised. Once she'd

cast the spell successfully, she'd lost interest in it. Her notes had disappeared years ago, and Lailomun's torment so amused her that while he lived—an unexpected side effect of the addling spell had given him an odd kind of immortality—she'd needed no other pets.

The brazier cooled, the ember images crumbled, but that hardly mattered as Mythrell'aa put her pet through his paces, sharpening her tongue on his wounds. Dawn had become morning before she grew bored. She left him twitching on the floor, returning her attention to the brazier. Using a bone-and-brass poker, the zulkir stirred hot coals from the bottom to the top, feeding them incense powders. Wisps of pungent smoke arched toward her when Mythrell'aa uttered the names of her minions, but none congealed into a recognizable shape. Her fears confirmed, Mythrell'aa added a drop of green oil to the incense mix.

"Vazurmu," Mythrell'aa called the name of an illusionist of no small talent and a woman bound to her in death as well as life. "I summon you."

"I hear you, Mighty Zulkir. My eyes and ears, my heart and mind are yours."

Vazurmu's voice came faintly out of the smoke. Mythrell'aa made a sour face as she poured amber oil and more incense into the brazier. The village where her minions were supposed to ambush Alassra Shentrantra was near the Yuirwood and the Yuirwood interfered with Red Wizard magic. Mythrell'aa despised Aglarond's great forest almost as much as she despised Aglarond's queen. When the Red Wizards finally conquered that wretched realm, she'd personally cast the conflagration spells to burn all those thrice-damned trees to the ground.

"Tell me what happened," the zulkir commanded.

Smoke thickened into a woman's shape and spoke more clearly. "An old woman appeared yesterday morning. No one knew her—"

"Beshaba!" Mythrell'aa muttered the name of her patron

goddess, "Did you think the bitch-queen would arrive with bugles and milk-white horses?"

Vazurmu's image quaked soot. "No, Mighty Zulkir. We were alert for all strangers, even birds and toadstools. Arnoz approached her cautiously. She saw through him before he had time to cast a spell. Then madness ruled. We followed your orders. The village is dead and burning. No witnesses survive to say what happened."

"Except for you and the Great Bitch! What happened?"

"I stayed out of the fighting, as you instructed. I kept her in front of me. I watched her. She is ... she is like no other, Mighty Zulkir. She is a fiend unleashed."

"I don't need you to tell me what she is, I need to know what happened next!"

"Yes, Mighty Zulkir I was hidden—quiet—no one could have noticed me, yet I was struck down from behind—"

"By a dirt-eating peasant! Beshaba gives me fools to work with."

"Yes, Mighty Zulkir." Vazurmu knew better than to argue with her zulkir. One word from Mythrell'aa and, the Yuirwood notwithstanding, her flesh would shrivel; another word and her blood would boil. "I am a fool struck down by a peasant and I have ill-served you. But I recovered my senses before the queen left."

"And?" Mythrell'aa paced around the brazier.

"I followed her to the stable where the horse was kept. She'd led the horse outside and had drawn a circle in the grass to take it away from the village. A boy—"

"A boy? What boy? You said, no witnesses."

"Yes, Mighty Zulkir. The boy and a little girl broke into the circle as the silver-eyed queen cast her spell."

If she hadn't already known the resolution, Mythrell'aa would have chuckled in eager anticipation. The laws of spellcraft were the same on both sides of the Yuirwood. No Red Wizard—including herself—could have held the circle if two people had broken it. It made what she'd seen earlier

that much more remarkable, more ominous.

"The backlash was terrible, Mighty Zulkir. A dead space opened where they'd been. Anything that wasn't already dead, died, I'm certain."

"You're certain," Mythrell'aa purred at her minion, already contemplating the woman's demise: Alassra had saved the little girl, at the very least. Vazurmu had failed on many levels; she'd pay the full price of failure. "Of course, you're certain. Where are you, Vazurmu?"

"I... in the village, Mighty Zulkir, what's left of it."

"You didn't try to follow her?"

"No, Mighty Zulkir. They're lost between here and there."

"Lost, Vazurmu? The Great Bitch lost? She's been seen everywhere. Where could she wind up and be lost? She wound up at home in Velprintalar—that's how lost she was!" Silence rose from the smoking brazier. "Vazurmu!"

More silence, then: "Mighty Zulkir, I entered the dead space. I cast my own spells. They were hurled into the Yuirwood, hurled through time, as well. I didn't dare follow. No Wizard is safe there."

Mythrell'aa raised her arms above her head. The window wards crackled with sickly green light behind her.

"I care not a whit's finger for your safety, Vazurmu. Didn't I tell you to follow the bitch? Didn't I tell you to be my eyes and ears? What good are eyes and ears in a dead village? If you'd done what I told you to do, even if you'd died in the forest, your shade would be there to tell me what had happened! What happened to the boy? Where's the horse? Am I to believe that the Great Bitch rescued a girl-child and left a damned horse behind?"

"Mighty Zul—!"

Vazurmu's plea for mercy was cut short as the serpentine wreath tattooed above Mythrell'aa's hairless brow glowed. Illusion's alliance with Szass Tam had given Mythrell'aa—among other things—an awesome and very private array of necromantic magic, ripe for casting. From the tattoo, the

light leapt to Mythrell'aa's hands and from her hands it narrowed to a dagger's point within the incense image. There was a flash bright enough to blind a zulkir.

The brazier clattered across the floor, striking Lailomun, who roused from his stupor. His eyes had been shielded in the crook of his arm. He could see clearly and, for the first time in memory, he remembered more than the distant past, more than the horrifying moment when he realized the woman waiting for him was not Alassra.

This time Lailomun remembered the brazier, the room, Mythrell'aa herself, and the words she taunted him with. He was a quick-witted man with a gift for seeing the shortest path. While the zulkir blinked and rubbed her eyes, Lailomun pieced together what he could. Mythrell'aa, his master in magic and first lover, had crippled his memory. She'd left him unable to recall recent events. He lived in isolated slices of time with no ability to plan where he'd go next or remember what had gone before.

How many slices? The question elbowed into his thoughts; he shoved it out again. How long, how many didn't matter. In his current condition, he couldn't hope to thwart, much less defeat a zulkir. In another moment she'd be able to see; his torment would begin again—and knowing that he, himself, was a Red Wizard of Thay, Lailomun knew that it was mercy, not tragedy, if he could not remember what happened to him. Except...

In his one memory, Mythrell'aa had said Alassra had a child. She'd tried to make him believe the child wasn't his, because legitimacy was important to Red Wizards. A poker lay beside him. It had fallen with the brazier and remained to sear his skin when he pressed it against his forearm.

You have a child, Lailomun told himself as he made a second, curving mark and a third that curved the other way. A part of you lives free. He knew he wouldn't remember but perhaps, if Mythrell'aa didn't take away the scars, he'd look down at his arm each time he awakened and read the

message there, written in a code he'd devised when he was an apprentice with many spells to learn.

"Lailomun! Stop that. You're hurting yourself." Mythrell'aa wrenched the poker from her pet's hands.

Their eyes met at close range. It seemed to Mythrell'aa that there was something more in his expression, something like hope. She seized his cheek, digging her enameled nails into his flesh.

"What are you thinking, Lailomun? What plan have you hatched? Nothing will come of it, my pet. You can't remember anything from one hour to the next. I've had you here for more than a hundred years and I'll have you for another hundred before I'll let you die. There's nothing you can do, my pet, nothing."

The light that had glimmered briefly in his eyes was extinguished.

8

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Near dawn, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

The moon set into the Yuirwood treetops, leaving Bro in deep shadows with only Zandilar's Dancer for company. The colt nibbled forest grass contentedly from the end of the lead rope. Bro had anchored the rope beneath his heel as he sat with his back against a tree trunk, too weary to sleep, too numbed to think.

A great owl roosted in the branches above him. Bro greeted the night hunter with proper Cha'Tel'Quessir deference. It examined him with gold-glowing eyes, hooted sharply, and fluffed its feathers until it seemed twice as large as before.

"Don't leave," Bro whispered when it batted its wings.

He heard the hollow ache in his voice. Ashamed by what he took for weakness in a man's character—he couldn't imagine his father or stepfather on the verge of the childish tears that threatened his eyes—Bro hung his head, hiding from the owl's judgment. He closed his eyes when he heard the

soft whump of its wings. Long moments passed, each bitter and burning, before he found the courage to look up again. The owl had moved to another branch, closer to the trunk, closer to the ground and him. Relief freed more tears. Bro wiped his eyes until both sleeves were damp and useless, then he stared up at the lightening sky and let his tears flow unhindered.

Zandilar's Dancer folded his legs for a nap as the lavenders of dawn yielded to the brighter colors of sunrise. Bro tried to follow the colt's example but each time he closed his eyes, he found flames and death. Think of pleasant things before you close your eyes, Shali had said in the days after Rizcarn's death. Fawns and flowers for springtime, summer berries, autumn leaves, and a warm hearth in winter. Bro thought of his mother, not her advice. Sleep was farther away than ever.

Dawn became a gray-clouded morning, unseasonably cool but damp and clinging. Dent would call it a day when he worked twice as hard to do half as much ...

More numb tears for a man he hadn't loved. Disgusted, Bro threw his shoulders back, cracking his head on the tree trunk. The collision distracted him; he repeated the act until its sheer stupidity made him stop.

His stomach growled; he hadn't eaten since supper a day ago. Shali had made bread soup and simmered it beneath a thick cheese crust. Her son's mouth watered, then his eyes: There'd be no more bread soup, with or without cheese. No more Midwinter puddings laced with nuts and bits of dried fruit. No more dumplings. No more sausage. No more of any of his favorite meals, nor any of the lumpy vegetable porridges in their various shades of green, tan, and orange that he'd never liked.

He felt like a fool, because he was. He felt alone, because he was, as he hadn't been after his father's death. Rizcarn had roamed the forest alone, leaving his wife and son behind. Bro's Yuirwood was a tiny cottage on the edge of the

MightyTree community, but still very much a part of it, with a steady stream of aunts, uncles, cousins, and lesser kin looking out for Shali and him whenever his father was gone. He wouldn't have been alone if Shali hadn't taken him out of the Yuirwood.

In Sulalk, Bro had dreamed of returning to the Yuirwood, imagining that he'd follow his father's restless footsteps, when what he truly remembered, truly missed was the company of MightyTree.

"I want to go home," Bro said aloud, because sound broke the isolation.

Home is gone, his thoughts answered.

"I want what I had."

It's gone, forever.

Bro sobbed loudly, waking Dancer. The colt stood over him, licking the salt from his cheeks. Bro knotted his fingers behind Dancer's ears and let the colt help him to his feet. There were twigs and leaves in the colt's mane. For a few tearless moments Bro busied himself with grooming, until he found a tangle that wouldn't yield to finger pressure. He wished for the curry-comb he'd made last winter and Dent's shears, both of which were kept in the barn . . .

Bro struggled to put anger in front of grief. He trained his thoughts on the Simbul. "All gods curse on her. This is her fault!"

But neither the curse nor the anger were strong enough to stanch his tears. He blamed Aglarond's queen and wanted her, too: The Simbul had said she would return and of everyone, she was the only one who could keep her word.

She was the only one who knew where he was.

Bro had left the Yuirwood just once, with his mother after Rizcarn died. He'd followed her; she'd followed a stream from the forest to the grasslands, from the grasslands to Sulalk and Dent. The night Bro rode Dent's mare into the trees, he'd been looking for the stream. He'd seen nothing recognizable then, saw nothing now. Bro had no idea where

in the Yuirwood he and Dancer were. And despite his bold assertions about being Cha'Tel'Quessir, the Cha'Tel'Quessir weren't one friendly family.

A lone half-elf could find himself in a world of trouble if he hunted in the wrong part of the forest. Rizcarn had managed, but Rizcarn wasn't like other Cha'Tel'Quessir. Bro's father claimed to be Relkath's messenger and said that the tree god protected him—which made his death, falling out of a tree, all the more pointless.

That last summer before he died, Rizcarn had taken Bro on two of his shorter journeys. What little Bro knew about living free in the Yuirwood, he'd learned during those few days. Mostly he'd learned to carve runes into Relkath's trees.

Remind the trees, Rizcarn said. Help the Yuirwood remember. If the forest forgets, we're all lost.

Rizcarn wouldn't explain what the forest was supposed to remember. He was long on telling someone what to do and short on telling someone why, especially when someone was his son, whom he didn't know very well. And, when Rizcarn did come home, Bro got sent off to stay with his mother's sister. All the childhood tears and tantrums Bro remembered were associated with those visits to his aunt's. Bro had begun to relive childhood events as if they'd just happened, balancing old hurts against the burden he carried away from Sulalk . . . trying to balance them, and failing.

Dancer demanded attention, rubbing his head against Bro's chest, flattening Bro's back against the tree until the youth had to scratch the places only fingers could reach. It proved impossible to wallow in memories while nose-to-nose with an animal that depended on him. He scratched, petted, and scratched some more, until the only pain he felt was a pleasant ache in the muscles of his arms.

"You and me, Dancer." Bro wrapped his arms around the colt's neck. He filled his lungs with the scents of horse sweat and a light forest rain. "Just us. We'll see each other through. Together, we're not alone."

Dancer nodded vigorously, not agreement, merely behavior Bro had encouraged over Dent's insistence that horses shouldn't be permitted to toss their heavy heads. And a wise insistence at that, when Bro's chin came out second-best in a collision with the colt's long nose. He'd bit his lower lip and the pain, though ultimately trivial, had him hopping on one foot—to Dancer's snorting amusement.

"It's not funny," Bro insisted. "I'm bleeding!" This was true and it produced a fresh scent that horses, especially young and untrained horses, didn't like.

The colt retreated, stiff-legged and tossing his head again in a way that made it both difficult and dangerous for Bro to grab the rope dangling from his halter. Disaster was averted, but Dancer wanted the rope's full length between himself and his suddenly suspect god.

"We'll find water and I'll wash myself off," Bro promised, tugging on the rope.

Dancer wasn't reassured, wouldn't cooperate. The search for a stream was a frustrating battle of wills, while a storm formed above them. Bro knelt down and drank his fill beside the colt. Then, because rain was falling and there was no longer a need to rinse his face or shirt, he looked for shelter.

A cave would have been best, but caves were few in the Yuirwood and any one large enough for a horse was likely to be occupied by something not interested in sharing with strangers. That left gullies, underbrush, and young trees with tall neighbors to draw the lightning away. Bro headed upstream until he found an acceptable spot where he and Dancer could wait in safety, if not comfort.

The storm left them soaked and shivering, though that changed quickly as the sun burned through the thinning clouds. Zandilar's Dancer munched on the bushes that had sheltered them. Bro found a handful of half-ripe berries that did little to end his hunger.

Flooded by rainfall, the nearby stream was out of its banks and choked with debris, including a gopher's bedraggled

carcass. Bro hauled it out of the water, said the words of departure and thanksgiving, and asked himself if he was desperate enough to eat raw meat because, though he had steel, he had no flint and even if he'd had both, the dripping Yuirwood offered no tinder.

"She knew," Bro admitted to Dancer, the carcass, and himself. That quirky smile on the Simbul's lips before she left with Tay-Fay had meant she knew his Cha'Tel'Quessir boasts were hollow. She'd given him a knife and boots but he'd need more if he was going to stay in the Yuirwood—much more if he was going to live free.

Bro examined the knife the Simbul had given him and the silver strand she'd wrapped and knotted around his wrist. The hair was her key for finding him—or so she'd said. And if—a very large if—he believed her. The knife was the finest blade he'd ever seen. It was sharp enough to cut wood or flesh and a whetstone set into its sheath would keep it that way. One touch and it would rid him of the silver hair, if the hair was her key.

He'd never heard of magic hair, but he'd heard of magic knives. After what the Simbul had done in Sulalk, Bro wouldn't believe that she carried a plain knife and he assumed she wouldn't tell the truth about it either.

"I should get rid of the boots, too."

But he needed the boots and he needed the knife, so he left the silver hair knotted around his wrist. That way he'd know if Aglarond's human queen kept her word.

Bro untied Dancer's rope and started up a gentle slope, away from the stream, leaving the carcass behind. He needed flint and tinder, yew wood for a bow and willow withies for arrows. Most of all he needed to know where he was. Sighting on the sun and its shadows, Bro oriented himself then started hiking northward. The Yuirwood was broader east to west than north to south and, little as Bro wished to admit it, he stood a better chance of getting his questions answered and earning his gear in the humans'

Aglarond than he did with his own kind in the forest.

Hunger and weariness claimed their toll. Bro's pace slowed and finally stopped, far from death but too exhausted to take another step.

"I've got to sleep," he explained to the colt as he looped the rope around a sapling and pulled it tight.

His hands were shaking: through the storm and since, he'd carefully not thought about why he was in the Yuirwood. Before he could sleep, he'd have to close his eyes and he feared the images that would seep out of his memory when he did. The mossy ground roots of a butternut tree formed a ready-made pallet. Bro picked off a few stray twigs, stretched out and quickly stood up again.

Butternut trees with their numerous, spreading branches were Relkath's favorite trees. Rizcarn never passed a butternut tree without carving Relkath's mark into its trunk. This tree was old, if Rizcarn had ever seen it, he would have marked it and Bro would know his father had passed this way. He found what he was looking for on the tree's southern flank.

Bro unsheathed his knife and refreshed his father's carving.

"Remind the trees. Help the Yuirwood remember. Don't let the forest forget."

It was hard work, even with the Simbul's knife, but not so hard that Bro forgot to clean the knife or tie it securely before he returned to his mossy pallet.

Perhaps Rizcarn had napped in this same place. Bro closed his eyes. He summoned his oldest memories, a summer day when he was younger than Tay-Fay and his father was outside the cottage, carving messages into the trees.

* * * * *

Despite his worrying, Bro's nap was deep and dreamless. He might have slept until sundown, or later, if a band of seelie hadn't noticed him facedown on a forest bed, too peaceful, too tempting for their mischievous natures to resist.

Bro awoke with laughter ringing in his ears and a sliver as

long as his middle finger, as thick as a songbird's leg rising from the back of his hand. In the confusion between sleep and wakefulness, he thought the sliver had fallen from the tree and that the tree was somewhere in Sulalk. An instant later, he'd recalled that he wasn't near Sulalk and why. He brushed the barb aside and forgot it as he pounded his fist and screamed silently into the ground.

"Get up!"

"On your feet!"

The voices were shrill, but not childlike, and very close to his ears. The words were clear, but the accents were wrong for either Cha'Tel'Quessir or human Aglarondans.

"Dance! Dance! You're supposed to dance!"

Dancing was the last thing Bro felt like doing. He lashed out blindly with his fist, striking nothing, though something hit him just above the wrist. Burning pain engulfed his arm, bad enough that he cried aloud. The pain ended as suddenly as it had begun; when he raised his head, he saw the tiny javelin that had caused it. He was under attack from creatures no larger than his hand.

There were at least a score of them screeching and careening against each other, disappearing and reappearing magically in the humid air beneath the butternut tree. Some were winged, some weren't. Some were palm-high, as Bro had expected, but some were larger and brandished weapons that could slice through a finger or an eye. He'd never seen their kind before, though one of his uncles told a tale of the seelie folk who'd haunt and torment a solitary Cha'Tel'Quessir until he went mad and killed himself.

"If you won't dance, then bark like a dog!"

"And croak like a tree frog!"

Bro's ears popped twice. He guessed that spells, not javelins, were his assailants' favored weapons and that, inexplicably, they'd failed to affect him. He knew better than to expect his luck to continue. The Simbul's knife, his only weapon, was on his belt beneath him. Bro clawed right-handed at the

sheath, while with his left hand he groped for any sort of weapon. The best he could grasp was a fist-sized lump of moss, which he hurled at the first thing he saw from the corner of his eye.

"Go away," he warned.

"Go away!" "Go away!" "Go away!" they echoed amid raucous laughter.

One of the larger, unwinged seelie with the head and tail of weasel and a stone-tipped spear darted forward and launched his weapon at Bro's neck. The Cha'Tel'Quessir weren't as quick as their elven cousins, but Bro was quick enough to dodge.

"Leave me alone," he warned again.

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" they echoed, adding rude gestures to their chorus.

Bro's ears popped a third time. He couldn't guess which seelie had cast the spell, nor what it had been meant to do. He guessed they were more interested in tormenting him than harming him, but he had little interest in being their goat, either way. Bent-kneed and balanced on his toes, Bro tore another fistful of moss from the ground. He feinted at the weasel-seelie, but threw the clump at a smaller, man-shaped seelie who didn't sense danger coming his way.

The man-shape dropped straight to the ground with the moss landing on top of him and his shimmering wings broken beneath him. He wasn't moving. All the smaller seelie vanished. The larger ones hovered together, humming a low note among them.

"I'm sorry," Bro apologized. It had happened so quickly, so easily. Yesterday, he'd been the victim; today, he was the murderer. "I warned you."

"He warned us," a seelie said and the others echoed: "Warned us."

"He doesn't want to dance," another seelie said, and the echo: "Doesn't want to dance."

"He wants to fight!" A hawk-faced seelie raised a silver

sword.

Bro swallowed fear and settled behind the Simbul's knife, striving to look more menacing than he felt or was.

The little seelie reappeared around Bro's head. Their tiny swords in their tiny hands couldn't break his skin, but they made him flinch while their larger brethren surged forward with weapons that drew blood. They concentrated their attacks on Bro's right hand and wrist. He kept his grip on the hilt until the weasel-seelie twirled himself around Bro's forearm and held on long enough to thrust his sword into the tendon at the base of Bro's thumb.

Pain paralyzed his arm from the shoulder down. Bro beat his forearm against the tree trunk. He knocked the weasel-seelie off, but he dropped the Simbul's knife, too.

"Now he'll dance for us!"

Bro lunged for the seelie who seemed about to cast the spell. His ears popped and a tingling spread down his legs. He thought for sure he was going to land on his face, but his feet began dancing wildly, and it appeared that he could not fall. He attacked instead, and knocked another seelie to the ground.

The seelie pulled back again, the little ones vanishing as before while the larger ones made their droning sound. One of them, the weasel-seelie, larger than before, pointed at Zandilar's Dancer, whom they'd ignored until that moment.

"Leave him alone!" Bro shouted.

His spell-driven dancing made it difficult to move closer to the colt without frightening him. But Bro judged that the lesser of two evils—Zandilar notwithstanding, horses weren't made for dancing. He'd sooner turn Dancer loose in the Yuirwood than see him go down with a broken leg. His greatest problem was keeping still long enough to untie the rope one-handed; he solved that by dropping to his knees and using his teeth.

His ears began popping before he got the knot undone. He began to sing loudly a song that made him blush, but he got

the rope loose just in time for Zandilar's Dancer to rear up, trumpeting like a stallion, and beat the air with his front hooves. Bro threw himself backward, legs still dancing. The seelie laughed, but not loud enough to drown Bro's bawdy song.

Bro hoped laughter meant the seelie were satisfied. He hoped in vain. Misty light in rainbow colors spiraled up Dancer's hind quarters, transforming horse legs into bear legs. The colt reared again and fell over, hard and screaming.

Dancer's agony was more than Bro could endure. He stood on his hopping feet, shouted a challenge between the words of his song, and charged. Magic and weapons pelted him. He was blind and surrounded by rainbow light, floating and falling, on fire and freezing cold at the same time. At the end, he was shrinking and growing a bushy tail.

* * * * *

Bro emerged from the top of the Simbul's boot, chittering his song rather than singing it, hopping from one foot to the next, and next, and next. He saw the forest clearly and all around him, but without color. There was room in his shrunken head for his name, the broadest outlines of his history, and the natural instincts of a squirrel; nothing else fit or mattered. When he saw the laughing seelie, he fluffed his tail and flicked it once, then bounded over his abandoned trousers. He dug his claws into the tree bark and escaped into a lofty tangle of branches.

9

The city of Bezantur, in Thay
Afternoon, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Thrul's spy master had discarded her disguise and, wearing a gown as sheer as any she wore in the zulkir's presence, worked her craft in a windowless bolt-hole. The gown was her own—that made all the difference in the world. The glass eggs in the chest in front of her had been

devised by her mentor, Deaizul, when he was in his prime. They belonged to her now, and if that made them less reliable, then she was doomed and Aznar Thrul with her.

The two-score eggs, blown from the finest glass a zulkir's gold could buy and sealed with a dollop of lead, sat in padded compartments in a shallow, wooden chest. Each was about the size of the spy master's nose and empty except for strands of hair—eyelashes, mostly—fingernail parings, and a powder composed of blood pearls, dragon wing, and bits of human skin. When the spy master sprinkled alegar over an egg and held it in the light of a particular lamp, the powder rose like mist. When she added of yellow gossypol to the alegar, the mist became a face and the egg became a short-lived conduit between the spy master and her spy.

Or it did, while the spy lived.

The egg the spy master held was inert, as had been the previous three. The four represented those Deaizul had sent after Mythrell'aa's minions in the Aglarondan village. It wasn't hard to imagine what had happened to them; it wasn't pleasant either.

She blew out the lamp and carried the inert eggs to the table that dominated her bolt-hole. She returned to close and lock the chest: her mentor had been adamant: the key to effective spy mastering was unrelenting attention to details. Beneath the deliberate disorder of their lives lay careful pattern and precision.

The spy master never stinted. She replaced the lamp, the alegar, and the gossypol, each in its preformed compartment. Her gaze lingered over the empty compartments, six of them: four for the men and women who would have to be replaced, one that had contained her egg when Deaizul owned the chest, and the last that had contained his. Minions from the lower ranks of her web would replace the four she'd lost, making donations of hide and hair as preconditions for promotion. The last two would remain empty while she owned the chest. The eggs that held

her essence and her lover's were sealed in a different chest, in a different time and place, where no harm could come to them.

She filled a goblet from a decanter no different from others on the table. After emptying it in three gulps, the spy master took up a steel scribe and began the tedious process of opening the eggs without damaging their contents. Half a decanter later, the eggs had star-shaped holes in their narrow ends and a small mound of mortal remains sat on a silver plate. The spy master sipped another goblet while studying her spellbook and grinding powder in an iron mortar: moonstone, porphyry, a knuckle bone from an undead elf. After the reagents and remains had been thoroughly mixed, she added the dregs from her goblet and whispered words passed down through generations of Thayan spy masters.

The silver plate was crusted and streaked with tarnish when the scrying was complete; the spy master's skin was pale beneath its tattoos. She dressed quickly in her wig and rags, cleared the table into a sack, and headed for Thrul's citadel. The reagents disappeared into a midden hole where the next high tide would suck them out to sea, but the silver plate was still with her, hidden in a more ornate sack, when she left her second bolt-hole in the flame-patterned robes of a Kossuthan priest.

Thrul's chamberlain made his usual protests, demanded his usual bribes, when she entered the forecourt of the Black Citadel. Pocketing her coins, he accepted the carnelian token of her position as if he'd never seen it before. Lord Thrul's chamberlain was either an expert dissembler or not quite the man he once had been.

"The Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir has a full schedule today. Return tomorrow, Or the next day."

"I'll wait."

"But—"

"Take my token to my lord, Aznar Thrul. I'll wait here."

Though it countered her training to leave a memorable impression in any mind, however inadequate, the spy master got the chamberlain moving toward the audience chamber. There was a danger that he'd get distracted or deliberately confound her, but the danger was all his. The spy master had other ways of contacting her employer.

Deep in the possibilities, she was almost disappointed when he returned with the gauze gown draped over one arm.

"The Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir will spare a moment for you."

He offered her the gown and with the same hand prepared to take the sack. The spy master shook her head.

"It goes with me."

"Unthinkable! No one carries in his presence. I'll keep it safe until you're finished."

"Unthinkable!" the spy master replied, though the man spoke the truth. She'd never before needed to bring an object to a meeting.

They argued without possibility of compromise. In the end she persuaded him with another handful of coins and entered the changing room with the sack still in her possession.

Thrul flattened her the instant he saw it. She lay helpless, convinced he'd broken every bone in her body, while the sack floated away. After an eternity, a familiar voice told her to rise. Slowly, she obeyed. Her pride had taken most of the damage; the rest of her was intact, though bruised and bleeding.

"A horse, woman!" Thrul snarled. "You come here, harassing my servants, disturbing my peace. I weary myself with spellcasting—and for what? A horse? Is this what I pay you for?"

"Permit me to explain, my lord. The horse is neither an end or a beginning; it's—"

"Explain away, woman. By all means, explain the horse. My curiosity knows no bounds."

The spy master hated him. Perhaps she'd always hated him, Aznar Thrul, zulkir and tharchion, with his acid tongue. But, having avoided the brunt of his scorn before this, she had been unwilling to acknowledge that her employer was a small-minded man whose spite was greater than his ambition. She'd overlooked his failings because his power supported her web of intrigue. But that was past: once she saw a pattern—truly saw it—she saw its implications, too, and they became part of her.

Thrul toyed with the plate, flicking it toward her, then holding it close again, catching sunlight on the horse's untarnished outline and flashing it into her eyes. His every move proclaimed he wanted her to ask—to beg—for its return. She guessed he wouldn't surrender it without some additional humiliation.

"Mythrell'aa's minions found what they were looking for in Aglarond."

"A horse?"

Thrul laughed at a private joke. Light from the plate flashed in the spy master's eyes again and lingered long enough that she had to blink. From its birth a moment earlier, the spy master's hatred had grown into a consuming passion.

A good spy lived without passion; it interfered with finding and analyzing patterns. Even with Deaizul, the spy master had felt only the pattern of love, not the passion. For one heartbeat, passion was interesting, by the second, it was inconvenient, and with the third she understood how Deaizul had lost his nerve. She pitied him: He'd chosen passion over pattern. Her mentor had made the wrong choice, a mistake she did not intend to make.

She'd take her hatred, seal it in a glass egg, and make it work for her. If Aznar Thrul wasn't worthy of her web, she'd use it for herself, for the glory of Thay, and bring him down slowly, piece by miserable piece.

"Say something, woman!"

"Yesterday, the bitch-queen came to that village where

Mythrell'aa's minions waited. They had neither the wit to recognize her before she recognized them, nor the strength to stop her after that."

"Mythrell'aa's a fool."

The spy master nodded. All the zulkirs were fools, squandering Thay's wealth and energy in endless rivalries while the real enemy got away. "A fool who knew the silver-eyed queen was coming to that village, looking for a horse—that horse—and the mongrel who bred and raised him."

Too late, Aznar Thrul heard what she was saying. He looked at the plate without laughter or mockery. "Final sight?" he asked, naming one of the spells that forged the image. "Did anyone survive?"

"No, my lord." The spy master gave her employer the customary form of respect, but not the content. Never again the content. They were enemies now, though he didn't know it. She would bring him down. "The silver-eyed bitch slew everyone, hers and ours alike. She wanted no witnesses to her thievery."

Thrul offered her the plate as if nothing had happened between them. "Show me."

Once the spy master would have been pleased to cast the variation of Deaizul's final sight that would animate the tarnish. It wouldn't have bothered her that Thrul needed to invade her mind to see what she saw. Once it had seemed reasonable that a zulkir should have the means to possess another wizard's mind; reasonable that he never committed the final sight spells—of which he had a complete set, written on parchment, embellished with gold leaf and the tattoos of the Invoker whose duplicity had inspired Deaizul to create them—to his memory.

Now, with hatred souring her judgment, the request and its consequential invasion of her consciousness flooded the spy master with another passion: contempt. She bowed her head anyway, invoking the spell with precise gestures and a single word, submerging her passions into the needs of the

moment. No one knew better than a spy master that vengeance required time.

Thrul's thoughts mingled with the spy master's as the spell played out the last moment of four lives. Three had died suddenly, blindly, in a skirmish of lightning and fire, but the fourth had survived the initial carnage. Laying low, he'd watched the witch-queen search each ramshackle barn until she found one that held her attention. He was creeping closer when his attention swung to one side: two more survivors, a village youth—a mongrel from the forest—and one of Mythrell'aa's minions, fought each other. The wizard was exhausted; the mongrel, lucky. Another Thayan died and the mongrel, carrying a small human girl, headed into the barn the witch-queen hadn't left. Using the youth as his stalking-horse, the spy followed.

The last image the spy's mind had held was a frozen scene: the queen and the gray horse, the mongrel and the little girl. The queen and the mongrel argued—the tone was unmistakable, though the words were garbled—until the silver-eyed queen noticed the spy. His life ended in flame and terror.

"Is there more?" the zulkir asked.

The spy master nodded, triggering the darkest spell of Deaizul's devising. After-death vision was deeply shadowed and without color. It saw the living world through a narrow slit in a floating sphere: a mangled corpse, an empty stall, footprints in the dirt, all pointing in the same direction. The trail led outside, to a large blackened circle. There was no trace of the witch-queen, the horse, the mongrel, or the human girl.

Thrul sucked his teeth pensively as the necromantic vision ended.

The spy master spoke first, to break the silence. "Something went wrong. Wherever she was headed, it's likely she didn't arrive."

"Rest assured that she did, woman. The silver-eyed bitch has

Beshaba's luck: her misfortune never falls on her head. Those others paid the price."

The spy master shrugged. "Our spies along the coast will send word when she reappears, or if she doesn't."

"Good, woman. Why a horse, though? If she saved anything, she saved that horse: it's what she went after in the first place. Find out what was special about it... or that boy. He wasn't human—one of those forest mongrels."

"Yes, my lord."

She needed no instructions in her craft from Aznar Thrul. The zulkir's arrogance propelled her to a decision not to reveal the true reason for her visit: There had to be a connection between that gray horse and the gods-brewing mystery that had lured Deaizul into the Yuirwood, a connection that now involved the witch-queen herself. Deaizul wasn't a particularly potent wizard, no match for the witch-queen. The spy master feared that he might need help and had hoped that the Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir of the Priador would agree to provide that help.

Now she wouldn't bother to ask, but she needed some explanation, some quick excuse to account for her unscheduled visit. One that had already crossed her mind and might even cross Aznar Thrul's mind. "I wonder, my lord, how Mythrell'aa knew where to place her minions, how she knew that one particular horse in that one particular village would draw the bitch-queen's attention."

Thrul stroked his beardless chin. "Yes," he said slowly. "How, indeed. Better spies, woman?"

"Unlikely, my lord. These were the first minions she's sent into Aglarond since you came to Bezantur, and half were castoffs from other schools. She had help, my lord, of one kind or another."

"Help inside Aglarond or inside Thay?"

The spy master nodded. "One kind or the other," she repeated. "To find out which, there must be pressure here in Bezantur."

"That can be arranged, woman. Easily arranged. I've waited for this day! I warned her when I took the Priador tharchionate that her time was up. Two zulkirs cannot live in the same city. She swore no interest in politics and broke her oath last winter. She thought Szass Tam had me on the rocks, but he's the one who foundered in the spring. He's not the lich he was! I'll tighten the noose; you watch who runs where, and then we'll call everyone in to account." Thrul straightened in his chair. "Well done, woman. I expect nothing less of you." He returned her carnelian token. "No hard feelings?"

She fastened the token to her gauze gown, pointedly ignoring the stains where she'd bled after the fall. "None at all, my lord."

10

The city of Velprintalar, in Aglarond
Afternoon, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Alassra's chambers were in chaos. Artifacts were strewn everywhere, as if a restless child had played with each for a moment, then discarded it. Spellbooks, some of them older than she and written in languages unknown in the realms, were heaped haphazardly in the middle of her work chamber. Every table top was clear for the first time since she created this bolt-hole. The walls were bare, the shelves emptied of all but her most fragile mementoes, none of them magically useful—gifts from her sisters, a lock of her mother's hair, the thorn branch she'd taken from Lailomun's pillow.

She'd learned the domestic cantrips for cleaning centuries ago, but simple magic never intrigued her. The storm queen had always been better at whipping up the weather than containing the dust that burst from an ancient tome. She sneezed—which didn't help her or the spellbook she held—and got to her feet, a feral growl rumbling in her throat.

"Where did all this come from? Who brought it here?"

The most rhetorical of rhetorical questions: No one else was in the room. No one else had ever been in the room. Even her sisters and Elminster, back when the Old Mage accepted her invitations, went no further than the antechamber where the little Sulalk girl was now sleeping on a gilded daybed that had once belonged to a queen of Chondath. (Alassra hadn't wanted to disturb the palace with her return when she expected—or had expected—to be leaving quickly. When she had everything back under control, when she could spare a thought for the little girl's care, then would be soon enough to throw the royal household into an uproar.)

Alassra had accumulated, abandoned, and forgotten the entire mess herself. She'd never had a permanent home before Velprintalar. She'd cached her few possessions throughout Faerun in warded boxes, none of them larger than a seaman's chest. Her life had been the pursuit of knowledge and adventure, not things, not until she became a queen.

Royalty acquired and accumulated. From her deathbed, Queen Ilione had warned her apprentice and heir: Clean out the past. Don't let it pull you under. Alassra had taken the words metaphorically, ignoring many of Aglarond's dearly held traditions as she established her reign, but Ilione had intended a more literal interpretation.

If dust had market value, the queen of Aglarond was the richest woman in Faerun.

She muttered another cantrip at the opened tome. Parchment sheets broke loose from the brittle binding. Two fluttered out the window, the spells written upon them lost for eternity, if Alassra didn't catch them before they vanished in the ether.

She didn't.

"Cold tea and crumpets! Where does the dust come from?"

Tucking those sheets she had rescued beneath the back cover, Alassra began a page-by-page examination of the spellbook. A spell for the transmutation of sand into glass

caught her attention. The other variants she knew produced crystal-clear glass, no matter the color or coarseness of the sand. This one, cruder in concept, yielded glass as mottled as its component sand. A little tinkering and it might yield stained glass panels.

Alassra growled again. After the dust, distraction was the worst part of cleaning. She hadn't meant to read her spellbooks, merely look at them, examine the pages for some vagrant mote of magecraft placed there or exploited by an enemy. There could be no other explanation for the ambush she'd triggered in Sulalk. Outside this chamber, only her sisters knew of her interest in the twilight-colored colt, because no one else could be trusted not to tell the Old Mage. She'd spied on the village in utmost secrecy from this chamber and someone, somehow, had spied on her.

On her! On Alassra Shentrantra, the Simbul, the witch-queen who'd mastered every kind of magic but was—perhaps—a bit behind in her housekeeping and careless with all these things she scarcely remembered acquiring.

Not totally careless, she assured herself. Alassra routinely examined everything she touched for magic and malice. The way she attracted enemies, vigilance was an absolute essential, but the Simbul rarely resorted to artifice. When she needed to eavesdrop, she'd transform herself into a spoon and ride the soup tureen up from the kitchen. Not many mages, though, shared her sense of humor; fewer still had the skill and imagination to bind themselves into a nonliving shape.

The mirror had been the most likely suspect, since the ambushers had been Red Wizards and the mirror was the artifact she used to keep an eye on both Thay and the colt. As soon as she'd gotten the little girl bedded down, Alassra had subjected it to a thorough examination. It had come up innocent of any tampering. She'd thrown a quilt—also examined—over it to keep the dust off while she probed the rest of her artifacts. Confronted with the prospect of

scrutinizing every page in her considerable library, Alassra decided to give the mirror a second going-over. She dribbled patterns of salt and rainwater across the dome.

"All right." She cracked her knuckles. "East, to Thay! Show me the tharchions and zulkirs. Show me Thrul and Szass Tam. Show me that damned Mythrell'aa. Show me Lauzoril last."

If any one of them had a connection with the mirror—if they knew anyone with a connection—the water would become steam and the salt would burst into brilliant yellow flame. Alassra watched as familiar patterns swirled in the glass. She marked a mutation in the Bezantur pattern: Aznar Thrul and Mythrell'aa were probing each other. When rivals squabbled, enemies paid attention. Otherwise Thay was unchanged until the end. Where she expected to see Lauzoril's rogue-handsome face, there was only a spiral as green as his eyes. Alassra glanced anxiously at the salt and rainwater patterns. Short of the mirror itself, smiling Lauzoril was her prime suspect. She wasn't at all relieved to discover that a day after the Sulalk ambush, his reflection had gone abstract. But there was neither steam nor flame.

"Show me everyone who wishes me harm." The mirror went black and began vibrating. "Sorry—bad question. Set it aside." The vibrations ceased. Alassra restored the patterns. "Show me Aglarond. Show me those who would work knowingly for the Red Wizards."

The mirror revealed a handful of faces. Red Wizardry had been Aglarond's dread enemy for generations. There were few households that didn't memorialize someone slain by Thayan magic, fewer still with members who would openly consort with the enemy, and the Simbul's mirror knew them all. Alassra used Aglarond's traitors as bloodhounds, letting them flush out the Thayan plots and minions that penetrated her realm.

They did very little that wasn't discreetly observed, by her or by her living accomplices, but it was possible that mistakes

had been made. A traitor might have made a Thayan connection without her becoming aware of it, but that wouldn't account for Red Wizards waiting in Sulalk.

Waiting.

Alassra considered the implications. She'd known her attackers for what they were by the reek of Thayan wizardry surrounding them, but none of the villagers had her skills. To them, the Red Wizards had been strangers. What might an ordinary Aglarondan say to a curious stranger? The mirror couldn't tell her what the Sulalkers might have said yesterday or the day before, but the question still seemed worth asking:

"Show me Aglarond. Show me those who speak ill of me or wish me the same."

The Simbul anticipated more faces than before: She was Aglarond's queen, not the bosom friend of each Aglarondan. Being fair meant everyone's fur got rubbed the wrong way once in a while.

"Gods! I'll be here all night!"

Alassra laughed without appreciating her own humor. It was one thing to know she wasn't loved as her sisters were loved and cherished by those who knew them—even Qilue was beloved by those who worshiped the drow goddess, Eilistraee—but the sheer number of faces flickering within the dome depressed her. And these were only the folk displeased with her at the moment. The mirror couldn't show the folk who'd cursed her name over breakfast or would do so at supper.

There were Fangers swearing in their squalid boats, revanchist Cha'Tel'Quessir muttering her name in the Yuirwood. Their numbers dismayed her, not their attitudes. No, the surprise and sadness came from the truly ordinary folk who blamed her for whatever misfortune had befallen them: a fishmonger whose eels had escaped from a broken basket, a wet nurse with a teething infant, a cook whose sauce had clotted, a baker with bad yeast.

Their queen was the mightiest wizard in all Faerun. She could destroy armies with a single spell. Why then—they demanded in words easily read from their lips—were her taxes so high? What did she do with their hard-earned coins? Why was it raining when a farmer wanted dry weather for cutting his hay? Why was it so hot—couldn't the Simbul do something about the weather? Why was she always somewhere else, but never in Glarondar . . . Emmech ... or wherever the mirror captured their reflections.

The mirror clouded; Alassra sighed and covered her eyes. Aglarond was a predominantly human realm, and humans were old when they'd lived as long as she'd been queen. They were ready to turn their affairs over to children, perhaps grandchildren, and, deep in their hearts, they expected their queen to do the same.

When she'd accepted the crown and throne, the Simbul had assembled her court from the best men and women she could find. They served competently, loyally, and the Simbul replaced them with equally capable folk only when they died or retired. It was fair to say that Aglarond was a better ruled realm than it had been during any other reign; but it was also fair to say that it was ruled by gray-beards and crones.

"Elminster," Alassra said ruefully and the mirror obliged by displaying the Old Mage's Shadowdale tower. "I need someone to inherit all this from me. I'm human, you're human—but we're immortal, too. We're old. All the Chosen are old. Think of it, El: we're older than some of the gods! I'm not my sister; I'm not Laeral. I can't go away and come back pretending to be my namesake. And even if I could, someone has to be king or queen of Aglarond while I'm off being nobody."

The tower door opened and the Old Mage emerged for a stroll. Alassra could have called him, could have transported herself to Shadowdale in an instant. He might have agreed, and today she didn't care where her child was conceived.

Then Lhaeo came through the door and young Azalar, the nephew whose unexpected birth had gotten Alassra thinking about heirs in the first place.

She certainly wasn't going to plead her case in front of Azalar. This meant that since the mirror hadn't solved her problems, she was going to have to deal with that heap of dusty spellbooks. Squaring her shoulders, Alassra cleaned the topmost book with her sleeve. The script was all dots and sharp angles; she'd have to cast a spell if she wanted to read it, which she didn't, so it was a good place to start, except...

"I've had this book for three hundred years. No one this side of the Outer Planes even knows it exists."

Alassra riffled the pages once. Nothing, literal or magical, leapt out at her. She shoved it on a shelf to gather dust again.

A wizard would need more than luck and a few potent spells to slip a spy-eye past her defenses. He or she would need patience, and while Alassra had patient enemies—enemies who'd been lurking decades, hoping for her to make an exploitable mistake—she didn't think she had any patient enemies in Thay. The Red Wizards weren't a subtle lot, a by-product, the Simbul assumed, of their reliance on slaves, goblin-folk, and undead minions to carry out their commands: their armies were fearsome, but as spies or slaves, orcs and zombies were absurd, and the Red Wizards knew it.

Red Wizards were predictable, not foolish, and—little as she liked to admit it—they knew their magic. Their academies churned out competent, albeit unethical, wizards year after year. The handful she'd dispatched yesterday would never be missed. They were, in all likelihood, already replaced.

Already replaced ...

The Simbul cursed her own foolishness, her own subtlety. She'd assumed that because there were journeymen Red Wizards waiting in Sulalk, one of their zulkirs had been

spying on her, had learned of her interest in the village and the colt. But it was much more likely that a zulkir had simply sent a team of expendable journeymen across the border in the faint hope that they'd trip over something useful. They'd been disguised as grain merchants, after all, not horse traders.

She'd spent the best part of the day covered in dust, while the solution to her mystery—if there was a mystery to be solved—was attracting flies in the ruined village.

Alassra cursed again before digging out the spellbook where she kept the spells she used to interrogate the dead. A glance or two refreshed her memory; it took little longer to assemble the reagents. It might take forever to get the chamber put back together. She made the mess worse looking for a little book of cantrips. She'd devised them centuries ago, the last time she'd been tempted to add a child to her life.

Three bone-rattling sneezes and a torn sleeve later, Alassra was standing in the antechamber with the open book in her hands. Tay-Fay was sleeping peacefully, almost exactly as they'd been when Alassra tucked her beneath a cobweb shawl hours ago. The child had every right to be as exhausted as she appeared to be. Sleep was the best healing for children: That's what Alustriel said, and where children were concerned, Alustriel, the mother of twelve, was the authority. Alassra sang two of her cantrips, enough to keep the child asleep until she returned; then she transported herself to Sulalk.

The village was a reeking, smoldering ruin. If any inhabitants had survived, they'd wisely departed for somewhere else, but it seemed likely, as the Simbul walked past charred cottages and swollen corpses, that Bro and his sister were the only Sulalkers left. She came upon a child's body, so badly mangled that she couldn't guess whether it had been a boy or girl.

"Vengeance," the Simbul vowed as an oval disk appeared, hovering on level with her knees.

She laid the corpse gently on the disk, which followed her to a grassy knoll, unharmed by yesterday's events. Time would wash away the ashes, restore the greenery, and, if no one came to resettle the village, revert its cultivated land to wild meadows and woodland. Sulalk wouldn't be forgotten, though. The dead would become their own memorial as, one by one, Alassra brought the victims to the knoll.

Not all were innocent villagers, to be treated with a queen's reverence. There were Red Wizard corpses scattered through the ruins. They weren't carrying the metal disks such as Boesild had found in Nethra. No surprise but, unlike her tall nephew, the Simbul didn't need tokens to separate the wheat from the chaff. A spell she'd devised and stored in a finger-sized wand had never failed to unmask a Red Wizard.

The first corpse she examined proved to have illusionist tattoos pricked into her skin. With the thought that Mythrell'aa was responsible, the Simbul's simmering rage boiled over. The corpse became stone, and the stone collapsed into dust before she was calm again.

The second wizard corpse bore the marks of abjuration. The third appeared to be a conjuror. A mixed party, then? A sign that the Red Wizards had set aside their rivalries for true alliances and cooperation? All Faerun was at risk if the zulkirs ever spoke and acted with a single voice: Thayan anarchy was Aglarond's staunchest ally. The risk was small. Once they mastered middling spells, Red Wizards were on their own. Only the best—and some of the worst—remained directly bound to their zulkir. The rest worked for whomever would hire them.

Alassra's gut continued to hold Mythrell'aa responsible for the carnage. Her heart knew it could have just as easily been Szass Tam, Lauzoril, or one of the many troublesome Thayans who weren't zulkirs or Red Wizards but shared their conquering ambitions. Then she came upon a corpse that

made her anxious.

The man's magic tattoos became clearly visible when she cast a simple revelation spell over his charred flesh: minor protections against fire and steel, major immunity to poison, none of which had saved him from her wrath. But the palm-sized area directly over his heart where each Red Wizard bore the mark of his or her specialty revealed nothing. She cast another more complicated and powerful spell with the same result.

It would be a chore to haul the corpse back to Velprintalar and a waste of reagents once she got him there, but resurrection—which the Simbul wasn't prepared to perform on the Sulalk knoll—followed by interrogation and execution might be the only way to find out how the man had obliterated his affiliation. Others had tried, with secondary tattoos, with their own magic, with acid and fire. Nothing had ever defeated her until now.

Until a few days ago in Nethra? Boesild didn't know the revelation spell; it was one of many the Simbul kept strictly to herself. Could she have raised that woman's affiliation, or would the corpse at her feet be the second un-branded Red Wizard she'd encountered?

And which zulkir had devised the spell—nothing but magic could erase the brand—that bested a spell of hers? Szass Tam sprang immediately to mind. The lich was as far removed from his so-called peers as she and Elminster were from theirs: Where magic was concerned, immortality was an unadulterated blessing for humanity. But Tam was laired up, purging the effects of a failed attempt to enslave a tanar'ri lord. That left... who? Mythrell'aa, again? Aznar Thrul, Tam's opportunistic rival? The suddenly faceless Zulkir of Enchantment?

A twig snapped. No accident. The two pieces were in the hands of a survivor wearing a face guaranteed to make Alassra Shentrantra's blood freeze in her veins.

"Lailomun?" she whispered as she raised the little wand.

Alassra would never forget the patterns of Lailomun's tattoos. They were very different from the light-drawn lines emerging from the survivor's scorched and tattered clothes—except for the interlaced circles over the man's heart. He was, as Lailomun had been, an illusionist. Logical conclusions cascaded through the Simbul's racing thoughts: The survivor was Mythrell'aa's confidant, not some mere journeyman.

Mythrell'aa hadn't forgotten Lailomun.

Mythrell'aa knew who Alassra Shentrantra had become after Lailomun died ...

After Lailomun disappeared.

After her beloved disappeared, not after he died, because Alassra's final conclusion—tenuous, yet almost inevitable, given what stood before her—was that Mythrell'aa had taken Lailomun back to Bezantur and held him captive for the rest of his life.

The urge to kill, to dissolve herself into the pure, violent stuff of lightning that would leave a crater where the false Lailomun stood and propel her own essence into the void where she would neither think nor feel, set Alassra's body trembling. She restrained the urge with no little difficulty. The false Lailomun, sensing his mortal danger, came no closer.

"Who are you?" the Simbul demanded.

"Vazurmu," the survivor answered, a woman's name in a woman's voice. She shed Lailomun's face. Her own was bruised and bleeding. Where unmarked flesh could be seen, it was a morbid shade of gray. "I served Mythrell'aa, Zulkir of Illusion, as you have, no doubt, guessed."

"Served?"

"We were sent here to watch a horse grow and wait for you to come to claim it."

Mythrell'aa had spied on her, Alassra thought numbly. Mythrell'aa had a spy-eye in her chambers. Alassra saw it in her mind's eye: the thorn branch. It was the first thing she

had brought into the tower chamber after she became Aglarond's queen, setting it on a shelf where she could always see it. Where it could always see her ... and the mirror.

Mythrell'aa must have been spying, if not from the beginning of her reign, then certainly not long after. Yet Mythrell'aa had waited until now to spring her trap. Why? Because the spy-eye had shown her not only the colt reflected in the mirror, but the reasons Alassra wanted it?

Vazurmu couldn't say. The woman didn't know about the mirror, didn't know the man whose face she'd borrowed—except that the zulkir had told her, in better days, that if she were ever face to face with the witch-queen, that man's countenance would buy her enough time to escape.

It didn't, of course. Vazurmu wasn't going to escape anything. Mythrell'aa had shredded Vazurmu's internal organs. She'd kept herself alive with a pair of healing potions and a burning need to avenge herself. That was done, or almost done; Vazurmu fell to her knees, her voice a whisper Alassra had to strain her ears to hear.

"We were betrayed. O Mighty Simbul. After you arrived. There were other Red Wizards here. Watching us. Waiting for you. Them." She pointed a trembling hand at the two corpses Alassra planned to drag back to Velprintalar. "I saw their faces. I could find out. Who they were. Who sent them."

"Who?"

Vazurmu shook her head. "Don't know. Saw their faces. That's all. Never forget a face. Someone knows. I'll find out. Go back to Thay. To Bezantur. Find out."

"If you live that long."

"If I live. O Mighty Simbul."

Vazurmu might live a bit longer. It wasn't unthinkable. Alassra had come prepared with a greater store of minor healing potions and poultices. She could spare one for Mythrell'aa's traitor. Maybe more than one. Aglarond's queen had a few other Red Wizards stowed in pockets

throughout Thay. One never knew when such creatures might be useful.

Nethreene!

Alassra's name—the private name only her sisters, Elminster, and a very few others knew—broke like a storm wave in her mind.

Nethreene, come home—NOW!

She couldn't be certain which sister had summoned her or why, only that it had to be important, had to be heeded. The afternoon had become a time for quick decisions, quick actions. Four unfinished tasks surrounded her: Vazurmu's interrogation, the memorial to the slain Sulalk villagers, the unbranded corpses, and Ebroin, somewhere in the Yuirwood with a strand of her hair tied around his wrist.

In her present state, Vazurmu wouldn't survive a sudden translation to Velprintalar. Alassra couldn't stay in Sulalk long enough to heal her. The two unbranded Red Wizards were nothing more than weight. Hauling them back to the palace wouldn't damage them any more than they already were. But the thought of resurrecting them after leaving Vazurmu behind and the memorial uncreated stuck in the Simbul's craw. Besides, if there were two unbranded wizards in Aglarond, there'd be more—and she'd find them.

One decision, then, would resolve three of Alassra's unfinished tasks. She slew Vazurmu with a word of power—more mercy than execution—placed her corpse with the villagers, and the two unbranded corpses as well. Then she cast shapeshifting magic to mold them all into a statue of Chauntea, the golden goddess of grain and summer. A second spell made the transformation permanent, and a third—she was squandering her spells at a prodigious rate—sent her back to Velprintalar.

She'd done nothing about Ebroin, except decide that she'd have to find him. She'd considered letting him stay in the Yuirwood as he so clearly wished to do, but if Mythrell'aa had known about the colt, then she knew about Bro. With

Lailomun's fate a reopened wound in Alassra's conscience, she'd not leave the young man wandering beyond her protection.

11

Thazalhar, in eastern Thay

Early evening, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Thazalhar, the wild and empty easternmost province of Thay, was a place to be endured by the wizards, soldiers, and slaves compelled to serve there. It was a place ignored by the rest of Thay, and loved only by the very few who chose to live among its rolling hills. That small number included the Zulkir of Enchantment, twenty leagues away from home and riding hard along the old Mulhorand trunk road out of Pyarados on the west bank of the River Thazarim. The zulkir leaned into the gallop of his favorite mount, a stallion carved from green and black marble and brought to life by the twelfth Zulkir of Enchantment a hundred years ago. The stallion was inexhaustible and unfazed by whatever magic a zulkir or his enemies cast across its path. Whether the road curved or straightened, turned glassy black or shimmering silver, the stone horse took everything in stride.

While his rider suffered.

Lauzoril had begun his journey before dawn in Tyraturos, deep in the Thayan plateau, crossed the Thazarim at noon and expected to be sore, but home in time for supper. A roomy saddle with a flying carpet folded carefully around it cushioned the zulkir from the worst of the stallion's hammer-legged gait. An assortment of magics kept him awake, alert, and free from the inconveniences of hunger and thirst, but nothing could spare him the headache born of continually enchanting the road in front of him so that wherever in Thay his journey began, it would end a half-day later.

Lauzoril could have used a spell to speed his travel and eliminate any discomfort. Indeed, he had used magic to

leave the Tyraturos garret where he'd spent the previous evening trading rumors and favors over dinner with a disgruntled diviner.

The dinner was at the diviner's request. His zulkir, Yaphyll, a woman who'd been allied with Lauzoril and Aznar Thrul until last year, was apparently ready to change sides again. The diviner offered a gift: a token of Yaphyll's restored good faith: a true copy—or so the diviner claimed—of a spell that would reveal not only the properties of an enchanted object, but the precise spells that had enchanted it. A useful thing, if it were a true copy, and, even if it was, insufficient proof that Yaphyll could be trusted.

If she couldn't and the diviner had been looking for advantage with Tam's enemies, then trailing Lauzoril's after-dinner spell would have gained him nothing. Lauzoril had destroyed the shed where he'd concealed the stone horse and it left no trail for either hounds or magic to follow. No one knew precisely where enchantment's zulkir made his home, and that was not about to change today.

To the best of his considerable ability, Lauzoril had erected an impenetrable wall between his life as zulkir and the Thazalhar estate where an undistinguished Lord Tavai dwelt in obscurity. With the arsenal of enchantment to draw upon in addition to his own personality, he kept his children, slaves, and domestic retainers ignorant of his public life. His Red Wizard peers assumed that he spent his private hours in pursuits best left unimagined.

Lauzoril's peers weren't entirely wrong. Their lives were rooted in Thay's stifling cities with their dark pleasures and illicit markets. When deceit and intrigue were called for, Lauzoril rose to the challenge, but between acts in the zulkirs' endless drama, he escaped to the countryside, proving—he supposed as he reined the stallion to a halt—that enchanters were romantics at heart and that their zulkir was the greatest romantic of all.

Once, long before Lauzoril was born, all that would become

They had been farmland where every valley was under plow and every ridge supported a flock of sheep. The farmers had been as poor as their land was rich. Everything they produced went to Mulhorand to please the god-emperor. In those days the Red Wizards were persecuted revolutionaries, firebrands for liberty in all its seductive guises. Driven from the Mulhorandi heartland, they fled north, past Thazalhar, to Delhumide, where they found themselves surrounded by unlikely, but stalwart, allies. Together, the wizards and farmers declared their independence from imperial laws and taxes . . . with predictable results.

Mulhorand sent its armies north to destroy the rebels and replant their feet on the farmers' necks. Facing certain death or slavery if they lost, the wizards and farmers waged a desperate war for freedom that culminated on the rolling hills of Thazalhar.

They won the battle of Thazalhar, but at tremendous cost. The Red Wizards fought with magic and minions from the elemental plains; the farmers fought with steel. Fighting was fierce—a score of Mulhorandi soldiers went down for every wizard or farmer who died. Mulhorand lost half of all its armies in that one battle; two-thirds of Thazalhar, women and children in addition to fighters, lay dead as well. Yet the land had suffered most. Scorched by spell-craft and soured with blood, Thazalhar's bountiful farms became blackened ruins where nothing grew or could be grown for generations. Even now, four centuries later, though Thazalhar was fertile again, it remained largely uninhabited. Each spring thaw raised a crop of grisly relics from their ancient graves. The boundary walls of Lord Tavai's estate were built from moldered bones and rusted armaments; they discouraged intruders. Visitors thought Thazalhar was haunted; residents knew.

Lauzoril dismounted. He exchanged his Red Wizard robes for a gentleman farmer's comfortable leather and linen. Then the Zulkir of Enchantment and Charm dug a small hole

beside the road and filled it with scraps from his Tyraturos dinner: crumbs of bread, a slice of roast pheasant, two green grapes, and a bit of cloth stained with wine.

"For the dead," he said, tamping the loosened soil back into the hole. "For Thazalhar and the dreams we've all forgotten."

It was customary for Red Wizards to pay lip service to some god in Faerun's pantheon. In his youth, Lauzoril had divided his infrequent prayers equally between Beshaba, Maid of Misfortune, and her sister, Lady Luck. The strategy served him well until he became Zulkir of Enchantment—more importantly, until he took possession of his predecessor's Thazalhar estate. Then Lauzoril's view of life and death began to change. Though he'd publicly continued his dual devotions, the private man sought a worship more appropriate to the scarred land he'd come to love.

In those days, The Reaper had been the deity most often seen, most often invoked in Thazalhar, but Lauzoril never warmed to him, perhaps because Myrkul was his father and grandfather's god-of-choice. Bhaal and Moander had appealed even less to his romantic temperament. Recently Kelemvor had appeared as the new Lord of the Dead. Lord Tavai approved of the new god's notion that death was the natural end of life. He began performing his private rituals in Kelemvor's honor.

Whether Kelemvor appreciated or approved of the offerings meant nothing. Like any Red Wizard who'd survived his education and gone on to acquire power in the Thayan hierarchy, Lauzoril believed in himself above all else—zulkirs couldn't afford the slightest doubt in that regard.

Lord Tavai remounted. He guided the stone horse off the road. They were on his land now, where a score of enchantments hung in the air, guaranteeing that even if he were seen riding across the ridges, neither he nor his unusual stallion would be remembered.

A small woods, framed with graveyard walls, abutted the fields where the lord's men and women tended his grain.

Lauzoril's shadow, long and dark in the sunset light, preceded him into the trees where a marble statue awaited his return. The statue was identical in all ways to the stallion the zulkir rode—except that it was pure glamor and dissipated as the real stone horse planted its hooves on the dais.

The woods were quiet, without the tang of menace Lauzoril's warding spells would have conveyed had danger lain waiting. He had, however, the sense that he was being watched. The watching eyes might belong to a bird or animal, and thus have failed to trigger his spells or they could belong to a magic user with the skills and spells to pass unharmed through a zulkir's wards. Lauzoril took no chances. He placed his hand firmly on the gold-wrapped hilt of his dagger.

The knife awakened at his touch and challenged his right to dominate it. Lauzoril met the challenge and quenched its rebellion. The knife's spirit, Shazzelurt, spoke directly to his mind.

Nothing, Master. Nothing magical. Nothing lost.

As old as the ore from which it had been forged, Shazzelurt was not easily deceived. Lauzoril heeded its warnings, but sometimes disregarded its assurances. He concentrated on a potent enchantment that could stun a serious foe and annihilate a lesser one. The fingers of his left hand formed the requisite gesture, the triggering word was fresh in his mind: he'd cast the spell with his dying breath, if worse came to worst.

Until then ...

"Show yourself."

He heard rustling. Without magic's aid, no human eyes could see deeply into the twilight shadows, but the sound had been too large for a bird or squirrel. Large enough for a man? Even now his wards were quiescent and Shazzelurt remained silent.

"I'm of a mind to be merciful, but be warned: My mind is

quicksilver."

More rustling, then movement through the shadows. Too small to be a man, Lauzoril considered the gnomes and goblin-kin he kept as slaves. The moment of mercy faded. He'd raised his hand before he heard a very familiar voice.

"Poppa? Poppa, I'm sorry. Please, Poppa ... I didn't know what would happen. I didn't know I'd find you here."

"Mimuay," Lauzoril sputtered before words failed him.

He'd come within a breath of killing his daughter and needed a moment to slow his racing heart. In lieu of words, he spun a light sphere from one of his rings and let it float above the stone horse's head. His eldest daughter stared at the sphere, at the horse: She'd never seen her father do what he did best.

Never.

She trembled, trying not to cry. Her hair was mussed with leafy bits. Her shift and face were both creased from lying on the ground. Lauzoril guessed she'd fallen asleep waiting for his return.

"Your mother will be crying by now, thinking that you're lost forever," he said with unfeigned sternness. "Everyone will be looking for you, but no one will look here. No one else would disobey my orders."

The girl nodded; a tear escaped and made a shiny track down her cheek. She was a plain child under the best of circumstances; tears did not become her. Lauzoril quenched the light and threw the saddle and its packs over his shoulder. The flying carpet, ever buoyant, eased the load.

"Shall we walk together to the house?"

"Poppa?"

She sought his hand through the shadows. Her fingers were cold and clammy. Lauzoril warmed them naturally with his own.

"Why were you in the grove?" he asked as they emerged from it.

Mimuay shivered and withdrew her hand. "I have a friend,

Poppa."

The zulkir contained a sigh. It was bound to happen. He kept his daughters isolated and innocent, but childhood couldn't last forever. Mimuay was thirteen. When he was thirteen he'd already mastered the fourth level of enchantment and forgotten his childhood.

"One of the retainers? One of the slaves?"

Leaves rustled as she shook her head. "A ghost, Poppa."

Lauzoril stopped short, shedding his burdens. He seized his daughter by the shoulders and pivoted her around until the dying sunlight reflected in her eyes. A ghost! He didn't want to think what a ghost could do to his daughter.

"Not a ghost," he concluded after his examination. Courtesy of his ancestors—Mimuay's ancestors—he knew more about the undead than any other enchanter in Thay.

"But he's not alive, Poppa."

"There are many things that aren't alive—that doesn't mean they're ghosts. Stay away from ghosts, Mimuay."

"Yes, Poppa. I promise."

"As you promised to stay out of the grove?"

She pulled away from him, staring back at the trees. This was not a conversation he'd ever meant to have and, not surprisingly, it wasn't going well. They were alike—he'd known that since she was old enough to talk—now they were both angry, both frightened. He took a deep breath and tried again.

"Does your friend have a name?"

"Ferrin. He's been dead a long time."

In Thazalhar, that was almost a certainty. "So, this Ferrin—whatever—did he tell you to disobey your father?"

Mimuay hesitated, plucking leaf bits from her hair and crumbling them to dust. "He said . . . He said I had a gift, but you had a greater one that you'd share with me if... if I went to the grove while you were gone and stayed there until you returned."

Of course, Mimuay had a gift. She was his daughter, as he

was Chazsinal's son and Gweltaz's grandson. She was his wife's daughter, as well, and despite what Wenne had become she, too, was the daughter and granddaughter of wizards. The aptitude for magic wasn't completely heritable, but breeding was important. Lauzoril's daughters were well-bred; both could find themselves held as hostages or worse in another Red Wizard's schemes for power. But Mimuay was special. She stood before him, as sunset became twilight, with her fists clenched and tears glistening in her eyes. Lauzoril could only guess what her gifts might measure. He feared her as much as he feared for her.

"Did your friend tell you what this gift I'd share with you might be?"

"No," she answered, a palpable lie, but one he'd overlook for the moment. "Did you bring me anything?"

Lauzoril pointed to the packs heaped behind him. While Mimuay burrowed with unseemly haste, he swore privately that he'd find Ferrin, the friend who'd stolen his daughter's innocence.

"O-o-o, Poppa! The colors—they're lovely!"

Mimuay had found her gift: skeins of jewel-toned silk from the Kara-Turan jungles and a coil of gold wire drawn finer than a single strand of the silk. His eldest daughter was an embroiderer, an enchanter with threads of silk and precious metals. Wenne had taught her; embroidery was the only magic Wenne understood. Lauzoril had hoped—even prayed—that embroidery would be enough for Mimuay.

"How can you tell in this light?" he asked, an honest question considering the circumstances.

"Because you chose them for me," Mimuay answered, a new maturity in her voice. "Because you're angry with me, and I want so much for you not to be." She stood up, a chapbook, not the silks, clutched in her hands. "Nyasia will like the doll. It's pretty, like her. Is this for Mother?"

"It is," Lauzoril replied. He knew where their conversation headed now, and liked it not at all, but he'd survived all

these years because he could face what he didn't like.

"Will you read it to her?"

"If she asks me to. Perhaps she'll ask you instead."

"Is it about a princess locked in a tower, waiting for a prince to rescue her from her cruel grandfather?"

"Of course—and, yes, there are pictures on every page. The princess has dark brown hair, like yours. The prince ... The prince's eyes are green, like yours, too."

"Was he a cruel man, Poppa?"

"The prince? He did what must be done, Mimuay, and made his peace with the consequences."

"Not the prince in the story, Poppa. The grandfather—Mother's grandfather. Was he a cruel man?"

"Both your grandfathers were cruel men, Mimuay, who despised their sons. But your mother's grandfather cherished your mother. He tried to protect her the only way he could."

"Was my great-grandfather the Zulkir of Enchantment?"

A man who'd faced Szass Tam's wrath didn't quake or crumble no matter what his daughter said, but that didn't stop Lauzoril's heart from skipping a beat or two. "More gifts from your friend Ferrin, Mimuay?"

"No, Poppa—and that's the truth, believe me. He's very careful with what he tells me. He says you're very powerful and he doesn't want to anger you."

"What Ferrin wants and what Ferrin will receive are entirely different, daughter."

"No, Poppa. No! Please! I guessed myself. Mother talks sometimes when you're gone. Mostly . . . mostly she lives in her storybooks but sometimes she makes sense."

Lauzoril lashed out with the back of his many-ringed hand, catching the blow just before it struck Mimuay's cheek.

"Never—Never!—speak so ill of your mother."

The girl froze, eyes wide with horror: she'd never felt the force of her father's temper—still hadn't felt its full, terrible force for that matter, but she—thank the many gods—didn't

know that. She dropped, sobbing, to her knees.

"I thought you were the prince, Poppa. I didn't guess you were like her grandfather."

"Exactly like her grandfather, Mimuay. I killed her grandfather in a duel two years before you were born. Since that night I have been the Zulkir of Enchantment."

Lauzoril hadn't meant to be cruel, not to his daughter nor to the child-woman he found locked away here on the Thazalhar estate, surrounded by tapestries and storybooks. Wenne believed she was a princess and he ... he was the image of the prince she'd been promised. For a year the young zulkir indulged her fantasies; after that, it was too late.

"Do you love her, Poppa? Do you love any of us?"

"Yes," he answered simply. The Zulkir of Enchantment was also the Zulkir of Charm: a consummate liar with the power to make any child believe that the sun rose in the west. He chose, in the end, to tell the truth. "Wenne is the heart of my home, the mother of you and Nyasia—whom I do love without reservation, even when I shouldn't. But no, Mimuay, I do not love your mother, not as a man wants to love his wife. When you're older, you'll understand."

Mimuay sniffed up her tears and rose to her feet. "It's magic, isn't it, that makes her the way she is, like a child who never grew up? Magic that her grandfather put on her?"

"The old zulkir thought he could keep her safe if he enchanted her mind so she could never learn magic—never learn anything at all except her embroidery. She wouldn't become a rival to him or a hostage to others."

"When will you put that magic on me, Poppa?"

They stared at each other. Lauzoril saw his own death waiting in his beloved daughter's eyes. He should kill her right now. The old zulkir's enchantment wouldn't be enough, hadn't been enough with Wenne. And because he'd raised his daughters with love and kindness—or tried to—he foresaw that Mimuay would come to hate him, come to

destroy him when she learned what he did outside Thazalhar.

The spell was in Lauzoril's mind: a word, a gesture, and his daughter would die instantly. He shook his head. The spell might be there, but the will to use it wasn't. He'd sooner die himself than harm her body or warp her mind.

"There are spells and magic all around you, to keep you safe, but my magic's never touched you, not even to straighten your crooked front tooth. It never will."

"Will you teach me, Poppa? Will you share your gift?"

Lauzoril couldn't refuse. His daughter became a child again, throwing herself at him, wrapping her arms around his chest. He remembered when she had embraced his knees. It hadn't been all that long ago.

He was a fool, a romantic fool, and she would become his death. But death would come; the new god Kelemvor hadn't decreed any changes. Death should come to everyone, even zulkirs.

Especially zulkirs.

So he foresaw that Mimuay would come to hate him, to destroy him. Where was it written that fate was immutable? Szass Tam could destroy them all tomorrow, no matter what a father decided to do tonight. And tonight that father had the leafy smell of his daughter's love surrounding him. The balance pans of his life were level. No father—no man or zulkir—could ask for more.

12

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Sundown, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Bro awoke at sundown, thinking it was dawn, thinking he'd gone to sleep with a stomach full of bad dreams. Then his bed bent beneath him, and he realized he wasn't in bed at all, but clinging to a far-too-slender branch. Immediately, he remembered Sulalk and that he was alone. Those grim memories kept their distance, giving him space to remember

how he'd wound up in the young branches of a tall tree. A very tall tree, once Bro had made the nearly fatal mistake of looking down.

He clamped his arms tight against the bark, realized he was naked, too, and considered whether it might not be easier if he let himself fall. When a breeze convinced him that he wasn't ready to die, Bro wriggled backward, one rasping branch at a time. The wood beneath him had grown thick enough to support him securely before he'd pieced events together.

He'd fallen afoul of the seelie. The Simbul's knife had protected him from their nuisance spells while he held it. When he'd finally dropped it, the infuriated creatures had struck hard. Bro blushed thinking of the song he'd sung and the foolish dance, but mostly he remembered Dancer trying to run on a bear's hindquarters. Then they'd turned him into a squirrel—that's how he'd wound up in the tree—and compounded their mischief with a sleep spell.

But what about Zandilar's Dancer? Bears couldn't climb trees as well as squirrels, but horses couldn't climb down at all. Bro almost cursed the seelie, then, but swallowed the thought. Cha'Tel'Quessir legend whispered of two seelie races, the mischievous ones who made folk act like fools and their dark cousins who'd hound a man to his death. He thought he'd encountered the mischievous race and didn't want to risk attracting the other one with a curse.

When he'd been a squirrel, it seemed that he'd run forever between the place where the spell struck and the tree. Returned to his natural form, Bro could see the Simbul's boots not more than twenty paces away. His clothes were there, too. By what little he knew of magic, when a wizard transformed a person, his clothes were supposed to get transformed, too. But the Cha'Tel'Quessir elders always said that magic was different in the Yuirwood.

He shook each garment thoroughly before pulling it on, expecting to find seelie mischief in each sleeve or trouser

leg, but they'd left no surprises behind. The cloth, though, remained damp from the afternoon storm. It felt dead and stuck to his skin. He shivered uncontrollably as he laced up the boots—that was mostly hunger.

It was almost two days since he'd eaten a substantial meal; another two and he'd be starving. He stared at the silver hair tied around his wrist. It had transformed with him. Maybe the Simbul hadn't thought to look in the trees. Maybe she couldn't find that bit of herself when it was lost within squirrel fur.

Maybe she hadn't come at all.

Bro could imagine someone leaving soggy boots behind, but the knife was right where he'd dropped it, and he couldn't imagine anyone, even a queen, leaving a good steel blade to rust in the forest. His heart hurt from too much loss, too much disappointment. His arm hurt, too, where the seelie barbs had pierced it, and his thumb was warm to the touch. Pain shot up his forearm to his elbow when he bent it. Poison, Bro reckoned, and hoped it wasn't strong enough to make him sick. Come morning he'd look for a willow tree and make a poultice from its bark.

Until morning, he'd look for Zandilar's Dancer. In Sulalk, Bro had patiently trained the colt to recognize his name and come when he heard it. Sulalk was another world, a world with pastures, fences and bright orange carrots from Shali's garden to reward the colt when he'd mastered a lesson.

"Dancer! Dancer, come!"

Damp leaves swallowed Bro's words. He sounded young, frightened, more apt to attract a bear than a colt. A bear or something worse. Seelie weren't the worst that lived in the Yuirwood. There were wolf packs, panthers, and creatures every bit as magical as the seelie, but a hundred times larger and meaner. Bro didn't think the Simbul's knife would help him against a greenhag, if he met one. The danger was small. The Yuirwood recognized the Cha'Tel'Quessir as rightful guardians, and in turn the trees sheltered the

Cha'Tel'Quessir from their enemies.

The forest should recognize him, despite his woven-cloth farmers' clothing. The Simbul's boots had almost certainly been made by a Cha'Tel'Quessir craftsman. They were soft, yet sturdy; the way his boots hadn't been since Shali led him out of the forest. They belonged in the forest, as he belonged. But just to be sure, Bro reached inside his shirt and pulled out a leather thong, which also had transformed with him when the seelie turned him into a squirrel. Carved beads slid along the leather. Four of them told his story: a son, recognized by his mother's MightyTree kin and his father's GoldenMoss folk, old enough to take part in the men's rituals, but—lacking a clear-stone bead—not yet a man. Bro's fifth and final bead, on the shadow side of GoldenMoss, was dark in the moonlight. His mother's father had given him that bead the day they buried Rizcarn, because the no-father bead had to come from a man, and no men from GoldenMoss had come to bury Rizcarn.

Bro scarcely knew his father's kin. Rizcarn never spoke of them, except to say that his parents weren't alive and that GoldenMoss was rooted in a distant part of the Yuirwood. Maybe not so distant now, considering that Bro didn't know where he was. He might find his father's tree-family before he found his mother's, but when Bro imagined the Cha'Tel'Quessir, he was looking for familiar faces. When he found MightyTree he'd sit down between his grandparents and tell them what had happened in Sulalk. He'd weep, but he wouldn't be alone.

They couldn't bury Shali, but they'd bury her beads—Bro slapped the pouch resting against his thigh, assuring himself that the seelie hadn't stolen them. His grandfather would give him a second black bead. He'd be an orphan for the rest of his life, but he wouldn't be alone.

The tears Bro hadn't shed when he awoke in the tree overwhelmed him, but each time he wept, it hurt a little less because Shali was a little further away. He swiped his eyes

on a damp sleeve and called the colt again, wanting a companion more than he worried about predators.

A crescent moon had risen above the trees. In a clear sky, it shed sufficient light on the forest floor for half-elf eyes to follow a trail, once he dusted off the tracking lessons he'd had from his uncles and cousins. On his hands and knees in the soggy mulch, Bro examined the ground where he'd last seen the colt. His stomach soured when he found the incongruous mating of hooves and claws. At least there was no doubt he'd found the right trail.

Broken branches and muddy streaks on bare ground marked where Dancer had fallen on his mismatched legs. Bro searched for blood, but every leaf and twig glistened moistly in the moonlight. One place, where the colt seemed to have had trouble regaining his feet, a sapling had been broken off. Using the Simbul's knife, Bro stripped the smaller branches and made himself a staff.

His confidence rose with a big stick in his hand. He moved faster, breaking into a run at the end when he saw a familiar shape among the trees. The colt raised his head before Bro called his name and met him halfway, nudging hands and sleeves in search of carrots. Bro ran his hands along the colt's neck and back, then down each leg. Except for mud and clinging leaves, the colt seemed unharmed by the seelie spells. Even the braided halter and its lead rope were intact. With the rope firmly in hand, Bro wrapped his arms around the colt's filthy neck. He'd succumbed to another round of tears when he heard a familiar, yet terrifying, sound.

"Never fight with the seelie, son."

Bro backed slowly away from Dancer. He'd dropped his sapling staff, but he had the Simbul's knife and withdrew it from its sheath while he scanned the trees for the voice's source.

"Do what they ask, son, and they'll leave you the way they found you. Do it well enough and they'll give you a taste of their honey and show you the crystal palaces where they

live."

"Rizcarn?"

Bro had spotted a too-dark patch in one of the trees.

The voice came from within it, but whether it came from his father—? Strange things lived in the Yuirwood—or didn't live. MightyTree storytellers preached about finding one's ancestors among the trees. Rizcarn himself had preached about waking the old gods. His mother had claimed to have seen the Yuir elves—the full-blooded Sy-Tel'Quessir—dancing by moonlight when she was a little girl. But most of the stories involving the living and the dead ended badly for the living.

"Rizcarn?" the shadow laughed. "Is that any greeting for your father?"

"Poppa," Bro said instead, checking his grip on the Simbul's knife. "Come down where I can see you, Poppa."

Branches rustled. There was a light whump as something landed on the ground. Bro strained his eyes. His father wasn't like other Cha'Tel'Quessir. His hair was glossy black, his skin, the mottled color of moss-covered bark. While he'd lived, he could disappear in midday shadows; at night he was invisible, except for his eyes. As a boy, Bro had laughed when he saw milk-white crescents glistening where his father's face should be. Tonight he remained silent.

"Don't trust me, son? I know I've been gone a long time."

"You've been dead!" Bro blurted.

The crescents vanished. Bro heard last year's leaves crunching beneath Rizcarn's feet. The sound reassured him a little: of dangerous creatures, maybe a quarter of them, had no substance and made no noise with their feet. He retreated a step, into Dancer's shoulder. The colt was calm; whatever that meant.

Rizcarn reappeared in moonlight. Everything that could be seen matched Bro's lost memories. Almost everything. He'd never seen that shirt with silvery studs along the seams and there was a knife long enough to be called a sword slung at

his father's waist.

"You've changed," Rizcarn said before Bro could get his tongue around the same words. "I suppose they're calling you Ebroin now?"

He shook his head. "Bro. They call me Bro. Except for Mother —" His tongue froze again. Rizcarn—if the man-shape were Rizcarn—didn't seem to know where he'd been these past seven years. Wouldn't know what had happened to his wife two days ago. Between two heartbeats, Bro gulped down his grief, deciding to say nothing about Shali yet. "Mother still calls me Ember."

"Mothers don't let go."

Rizcarn came closer. He stroked the length of Dancer's nose, then reached for Bro's hand, the hand that held the Simbul's knife. Without thinking, Bro brought the knife up between them.

"You can trust me, son. I am your father."

"You died, Poppa. I saw you. Your neck was broken. We dug a grave and buried you ... seven years ago."

Bro watched something like shock harden his father's face for a moment, then the moment passed. He realized Rizcarn's hand was touching his.

"Sheathe it, son. Relkath wasn't finished with me. I've come back to finish what I started. I've been waiting for you."

"Here? I've never been here before. I don't even know where I am. One of us is very lucky, Poppa."

Rizcarn turned his attention to the colt, releasing his son's hand. "You've done well, son. He's strong and healthy. Zandilar will be pleased; she's been waiting for you, too."

Bro sheathed the knife, dropped Dancer's lead rope, and ran his hands through his hair, as if his fingers could massage understanding through his scalp. Rizcarn studying Dancer gave Bro an opportunity to study Rizcarn. He guessed the opportunity was no accident, but took it gratefully.

The father he remembered was a tall man. When they'd last embraced Bro's ear had pressed against his father's heart.

Now, Bro was a bit taller and broader, as if his life among humans during his growing years had made him more like them, less like the Cha'Tel'Quessir.

He wondered what it would feel like, staring over his father's shoulder, his arms clutched around ribs no wider than his own. Seven years ago, he would have given anything to hug his father again.

Now . . . ?

Now, Bro had all he could do to extend one arm. And stop short of touching his father's arm. Rizcarn's shirt was dry.

"Were you waiting long, Rizcarn?"

The older man turned. His eyes, dark circles within stark white, were narrow. "Still can't make up your mind, son? What sign do you need?"

Bro shook his head.

"What's happened to you, son? Aren't you glad to see me again?"

He tried to say that he was, but Bro had never been much of a liar. He stared at the stars, at the trees, anywhere but at the man-shape who claimed to be his father. "You left us, Poppa. You went away so many times. We thought it wouldn't be different. She thought, but it was. You're seven years too late, Poppa."

Rizcarn touched the beads around Bro's neck, pushed them aside. He touched Bro's shirt and rubbed the homespun cloth slowly between his fingers. "I couldn't find you, son. She'd taken you away. Settled you with the dirt-eaters." He released Bro's shirt and laid his hand on Bro's shoulder where it was a warm, reassuring weight. "Outside's no place for one of Relkath's. No place for any Cha'Tel'Quessir. It's her fault. Blame her, son; she's kept us apart."

Bro shrugged free. "You broke Momma's heart, Poppa, when you died. She couldn't bear the trees. Every one reminded her of you. She couldn't live in the Yuirwood any longer, so she left."

"Taking you, son. She took you away. She shouldn't have

done that. You belong to the forest."

He'd said the same words countless times to Shali, but they sounded different in Rizcarn's voice, not about home, about possession. For the love and honor he held in his heart for both his parents, Bro swallowed his growing anger and said nothing.

"That's over now." Rizcarn took Dancer's lead rope. "Past. Forgotten. You're here now; that's what matters. We have much to do, son. Let's go."

Bro yanked the rope from Rizcarn's hand. Dancer shied; his front hooves lifted. Bro yanked the rope a second time and snapped the loose end against the colt's neck. It was, perhaps, the fourth or fifth time in the colt's short life that Bro had struck him in anger. Dancer might have exploded. Instead he stood rigid, just like Bro.

"Don't tell me what to do, Poppa," he said after a moment's silence. "I'm not a boy anymore. I'm not your son, ready to do whatever you told me to do, because you were gone so much. I saw my father fall out of a tree and break his fool neck. Maybe you're him come back; maybe you're not. Maybe you should ask me where I've been and why I've come back to the Yuirwood. Maybe you should ask about her."

"Her?"

"Her. My mother. Shali. Your wife! Yes, she took me with her to a village outside the Yuirwood. She met a man, a good man, a man who was there all the time, who never left her alone, crying herself to sleep—" Bro could scarcely believe the anger pouring out of his mouth, or the ache he felt for Dent. "A human man who loved her, not the forest or the trees or Relkath Many-Limbed—"

"Son ... Ebroin ... be careful what you say."

Bro ignored the warning. "They had a child between them, a daughter, human, with his blue eyes and a round face. She saw her father every day—every gods' curst day, Poppa. Until two days ago." His anger flagged, remembering it now

as if it were still happening. He drew a deep breath, mixing anger and grief together. "Wizards came to our village. Red Wizards, blue wizards, all kinds of wizards including the Simbul herself. Everybody died except me and my sister. Dent. .. Dent..." Bro couldn't see Rizcarn through his tears. He saw his stepfather, though, clear as life, or death. "They'd cut him in two and part of him was gone, just gone. And Momma was dead, lying on the floor with the back of her head smashed in.

"I tried to run away with Tay-Fay and Dancer. I killed a man, Poppa, on my way to the stable. I shoved a pitchfork into his gut a score of times. When I went to the stable, I was too late; the Simbul was already there. She'd come for Dancer."

"The Simbul, son? You're sure it was the witch-queen?"

"You say you're my father; she said she was the Simbul. She killed the last wizard, then she tried to steal Dancer. I wouldn't let her. I burst into her stealing spell and we wound up here, in the Yuirwood." He was nearing the end of his story, the end of his strength. "I ... I let her take Tay-Fay. I stayed behind, with Dancer. I'd had a dream—a vision—when he was born. Zandilar, she told me to come dance with her, here in the Yuirwood. I knew I would; I wanted to come home ..."

Rizcarn took him by the arms. "You have come home. She's here, waiting for you."

"Momma?"

"Zandilar!"

Bro could almost see Zandilar dancing in the moon's reflection off his father's eyes. He could almost hear her voice. Almost forget what he'd seen these past two days.

"There's a place here in the Yuirwood for you, son. Let's go."

It would be so easy to let Rizcarn lead him where he'd wanted to go, to Zandilar, but Bro shrugged free a second time.

"You don't care. You don't care that Momma's dead or how she died. You don't care about anything but the forest."

"Her path led out of the Yuirwood, son."

Rizcarn reached again and was met by tense muscles, bared teeth. He staggered backwards, as if Bro had physically assaulted him. His mouth worked furiously, shaping unspoken words until he finally said:

"As dead as I was to her, son, outside the Yuirwood, Shali was dead to me. You still have your tears; mine have all been shed. I grieved for both of you, but you've come back and I cannot deny my joy at seeing you."

He opened his arms and it seemed, for a heartbeat, that there was radiant light within them. The moment passed, the light faded, but a sense of warmth remained. Bro was cold; he was alone. He knew the risks, and took them anyway: a semblance of a father was better than no father, no mother, no family, no one at all. His father's arms tightened around him. For another heartbeat, everything was wrong, then that moment, too, passed and he let his hands slide into the warmth between Rizcarn's hair and shirt. There was a difference, looking over Rizcarn's shoulder, but it was not as great as he'd imagined it would be, and he was still aware of his father's heartbeat.

"Come with me, son. Walk beside me as I do Relkath's work. If you're not happy, go back to the dirt-eaters'—to the human villages. No one will stop you."

Bro nodded. Where else was he going to go? Back to a burned-out village? To the Simbul's royal city? To MightyTree or GoldenMoss? He could starve before he found his living kin. Rizcarn wasn't starving; his flesh was solid beneath his fancy shirt.

"I missed you, Poppa. I missed you so much that I hated you, too."

"I was a fool, Ebroin. I taunted fate; you and your mother paid the price. I'm sorry; forgive me?"

Bro weighed his choices: Was Rizcarn's apology sufficient? Where else could he go?

"Is there food where we're going, Poppa? I haven't eaten in

two days."

"Of course there's food? Are you still taking me for a ghost, son? I've got a cache not far from here. We'll be there by moonset if we start walking now."

"Let's go, then," Bro agreed. He grabbed a handful of Dancer's mane and vaulted onto his back.

Rizcarn's face became a stern mask. "Get down from there!"

"We'll manage. I'm done in, Poppa. There's no way I can walk till moonset. Dancer knows me, I've ridden him before."

"Not in the Yuirwood. Only Zandilar can set a man atop her horse. Only she can choose his rider. You presume too much. She has invited you to dance, but she hasn't chosen you. You shame the gods, Ebroin. Get down."

More than a bit daunted, Bro slid down from Dancer's back. The mere thought of walking till moonset left his feet feeling like rocks each time he lifted them, but lift them he did, following Rizcarn through the shadows.

"Who is Zandilar?" he asked when numbness had set in and his thoughts were free to wander.

"You said you had a dream, a vision. Wasn't that enough? Her name is written on the Sunglade stones."

"Are we going to the Sunglade? Is that where I'll see her and dance with her?"

Rizcarn took several steps before answering: "In time, son, if she chooses you. But first we must visit another place and then we must summon the Cha'Tel'Quessir. When that's done, we'll go to the Sunglade. The Yuirwood will be ours again. No outsiders, just the Cha'Tel'Quessir. The dirt-eaters, their cities, and their queen will fade away."

Without warning, the apprehension Bro had felt when he first heard his father's voice in the trees returned. "I'd better not go with you, Poppa. She's going to be looking for me."

"She'll be in the Sunglade."

"Not Zandilar. The Simbul." He knew he'd said the precise wrong thing as soon as the words flowed out of his mouth, but there was no stopping them. "She gave me this." He

held up his arm where the silver hair circled his wrist. "I left Sulalk with nothing. She said she'd bring me what I needed."

"But she didn't, did she? The witch-queen's promises are hollow. She isn't part of the Yuirwood," Rizcarn said in the same tone he'd used to order Bro down from Dancer's back. He snapped a forked twig from a nearby bush and carefully notched the tines. "When Relkath's work is finished, the Yuirwood won't need her sort of magic. Let me see that."

Bro reminded himself that the first blame fell on the Simbul, who came to Sulalk and brought the wizards in behind her. Choosing between her and his father was no good choice at all, except the Simbul would take Dancer with her to Velprintalar. He held out his arm.

Rizcarn fitted the strand into the notches before he cut it. There was just enough slack for Bro to slip his hand free without disturbing the notch-bound hair.

"We'll toss this into the next stream we cross."

Bro followed quietly. He'd aged a lifetime when Shali died. Now he'd shed those years, becoming a child again, doing what his father told him to do, just as he'd done when he was a little boy. He'd taken the wrong turn someplace, but he hadn't seen a better path. When he looked over his shoulder, he didn't see any path at all.

13

The city of Velprintalar, in Aglarond
Nearing midnight, the fifteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of
the Banner (1368DR)

Order had been restored to the Simbul's privy chambers at a cost measured in pride rather than possessions, although the thorn branch was gone, crushed to dust along with its crystal case.

That had hurt.

Alassra stood with her back against the doorjamb between her workroom and its antechamber while Alustriel's skilled fingers directed the last of the dust out the open window.

"You are astonishing," Alassra said in a determinedly neutral tone.

"It must run in the family." The elder sister shrugged. "Well, at least you'll be able to find what you're looking for now—for a few months."

"Nonsense. It will take me at least a year before I know where anything is." She entered the antechamber. "Tea?"

Alustriel followed Alassra. A plain clay pot simmered on the brazier. Fruit and a plate of cold, sliced meat sat on a table beside it. The sisters ate in silence, until Alustriel broke it.

"So, tell me, what was a little girl doing here, and why, by Mystra's mercy, did you leave her alone?"

Alassra set down her cup. "Because it seemed like a good idea at the time? I told you: There was a problem in a village. There were loose ends and I had to get them tied up quickly. I intended to be back before now. Cold tea and crumpets, Alustriel! The child was exhausted. I thought I was right, letting it sleep—"

"Her, 'Las. Letting her sleep."

"Don't goad me," the storm queen warned. "The child has seen terrible things. You're the one who says children heal while they're sleeping. She was already asleep. I sang her a lullaby cantrip. I thought it would keep her asleep until I got back."

Alustriel sighed. "Babies. I'm sure I said babies. Babies sleep most of the time, but even they wake up every few hours. That little girl is seven years old; she's not a baby. A lullaby cantrip won't work on a seven year old, not for long anyway.

And you left her here, in these rooms! There must be a thousand ways for a child to hurt herself here."

"How was I to know she hadn't been properly raised? If she had, she wouldn't have touched anything."

"Tell that to the Witches of Rashemen!"

Alassra opened her mouth and closed it again.

"We can be grateful," Alustriel continued, "that all Tay-Fay did was open a window. That started the between whirling. I'm surprised you didn't hear."

"I was busy. I made a mistake; I can see that, but the child was here because every adult in her village had died at Red Wizard hands. I was trying to get her, a brother, and a horse set to rights."

"A horse? You haven't said anything about a horse. El's infamous birthday gift?"

Alassra simmered, then cooled. "Yes, that horse, in that village. The wizards found out. . . Oh, never mind: It's too complicated." Alassra poured more tea. Her sisters didn't know about Lailomun; the family needed a few kept secrets.

"Boesild said there were fresh problems with Thay."

"He told you about Nethra?" Alassra asked.

Alustriel nodded. "Something is different in Aglarond, 'Las. You didn't sense a breach in your own bolt-hole?"

"I said I was busy. If Boesild told you about Nethra, you can understand those corpses took all my concentration."

"Of course. But I noticed a difference as soon as I got here."

Alassra swallowed pride with her tea. "Thayan?" she asked, all but conceding that she'd grown so accustomed to Red Wizard incursions that she no longer trusted her ability to detect a new one.

"I'm not sure. What I felt was wild, like the wind before a summer storm."

They both looked out the window where distant lightning silently streaked the sky above the Inner Sea. At this time of year it was sometimes hard for any wizard to sense the difference between man-made magic and the natural

interaction between sunlight and salt water. Then Alustriel said:

"If it bears the mark of anything, it bears the mark of the wilderness. I've felt something similar in the High Forest south of Silverymoon."

"The Yuirwood," Alassra sighed. "Something's rising in the Yuirwood." She'd known that—or she should have—when she first heard the colt's name, certainly when she'd found herself deep in both the forest and the past. Suddenly, talking about children seemed preferable again. "What did you do with the child?"

"Why, you don't even know her name, do you? It's Taefaeli."

"She was asleep! I saw no need to wake her up with foolish questions."

Alustriel had the decency to be shocked and the grace to keep her opinions to herself. "I found a very nice woman in the palace below. She's human, but her mother was half-elf and she's got a brother in the forest. She knows what Tay-Fay needs. She'll help her understand that her brother won't be coming back."

"I know that, but how, by the coruscating frosts of Talimesh, do you know that?"

"Children listen and children talk. Tay-Fay told me about Sulalk before I summoned you. She told me what happened to her parents, in the stable when you saved her brother's life and when she told him that you were stealing his colt, the spell-ride to the Yuirwood, and the look in Bro's eyes when the two of you were bargaining."

"All this time, you've known all that and you've been asking me questions as if you didn't." Alassra smiled. Her teeth showed; she didn't care. "Which one of us do you believe, sister?"

"You, of course," Alustriel said quickly. "But, what drew your attention to this Zandilar's Dancer in the first place? A vision? Who is Zandilar?"

"The Old Mage thinks she's one of the goddesses the old Yuir

elves worshiped in addition to the Seldarine pantheon—or, maybe, before them. He's been helping me with the research. I've been trying to get him here, as I'm sure you know. Once I had the colt in my stable, I thought... Well, the infamous birthday gift, as you said."

"You know, 'Las, you truly should think this through. A child, if Tay-Fay's any indication .. ."

Alassra set her cup down. The bowl cracked; the handle broke. "I have thought this through. I'm not planning to have twelve—" She stopped in mid-tirade. She'd just felt a sharp pain on her scalp, as if she'd plucked out an exceptionally well-rooted hair. She glanced out the window where the coming storm hid the moon and stars. "Cold tea and scones! Sundown. I told him I'd be there at sundown." She glared at her sister.

Alustriel scrutinized the specks floating in her tea. "I thought about it when the sun set. He doesn't want to come to Velprintalar ... I assumed you knew. I assumed you were letting him keep his horse."

"Well, you assumed correctly—for now, anyway. He had nothing from Sulalk, not even shoes. I left him a knife and my boots. I was going to take him better kit."

Alustriel was on her feet. "We'll take it now. He'll understand."

Alassra started to object that Ebroin wouldn't understand anything, then abandoned the notion. Alustriel charmed elves; poor Ebroin wouldn't stand a chance. He'd probably agree to follow her to Silverymoon.

"He's in trouble. I gave him a token—a strand of hair. It just broke."

"What are we waiting for?"

The sisters clasped hands. The cozy chamber vanished and was replaced by Yuirwood shadows. They were alone on the bank of a stream-fed pool. Bro wasn't there. There were no signs of a fight or ambush cut into the moss. No indication that any Cha'Tel'Quessir had visited the pool recently.

"You're sure this is the right place?"

Alassra had been transporting herself around Abeir-toril for nearly six hundred years. She wasn't perfect, but her mistakes were few and far between—until now. In two days, two spells had dumped her in out-of-the-way parts of the Yuirwood; the same part of the Yuirwood, unless she missed her guess. The forest had always been chancy for wizards, but only a blind fool would fail to detect the beginnings of a new and ominous pattern.

She opened her mind, searching for a piece of herself. If her senses could be trusted, a strand of her hair was nearby.

"It's the place that drew me. Whether it's the right place—look for yourself."

Alassra hadn't meant for her sister to take her words literally, but Alustriel stripped off her gown and sandals. She dived head first into the dark-water pool, causing Alassra's heart to skip beats until a silvery wreath broke the water's surface.

"He didn't drown."

"There were other—safer—ways to learn that."

"And waste more time, if he was under water."

Alustriel paddled to the side of the pool. Alassra knelt on the bank, offering her hand. The sense that her hair was nearby had grown stronger. Squinting, she caught a glint of silver in an eddy on the pool's far side. Alustriel swam and brought back a forked twig to which Alassra's hair had been carefully attached. She took her sister's hand and climbed onto the bank where she shed a graceful waterfall and was completely—perfectly—dry.

One of the twig's tines was empty, the other wasn't.

"He had help," Alassra decided.

"You gave him a knife. I assume the steel was good enough to cut hair."

"Umm . . . But what I felt was this end coming loose. This was notched and the strand attached before it was cut and I'd tied it around the arm he favored. He'd need help to

perform that trick with his off-weapon hand."

"An extra pair of hands, perhaps, but help?"

"We weren't bargaining," Alassra admitted, harkening back to Alustriel's recounting of her conversation with the little girl. "He blamed me for what happened. He didn't want my help. If he found it..."

"He'd have left your hair, your boots and your knife where you could easily find them. This," Alustriel twirled the twig between her fingers, "floated here. Someone made certain that Bro would be far away when you found it."

"Alustriel, you have a devious and suspicious mind. I like that in a sister."

"I try to keep in practice. Shall we wander our way upstream?"

"You're sure the little girl won't get into mischief while we're gone?"

"Absolutely."

The sisters hiked opposite banks of the stream, their mage-trained senses sharp for signs of a struggle—broken branches, dislodged stones, skid marks in the damp moss. They were alert for immaterial clues as well, the faint traces that spellcasting, though the latent magic of the Yuirwood consumed such traces quickly.

Two sets of footprints and—more tellingly—a set of hoofprints marked the place where Bro and his now-confirmed companion dropped the twig into the stream. There were no indications that Bro was other than a willing participant in deception. The horse and the two Cha'Tel'Quessir—both sisters assumed Bro was with another Yuirwood half-elf—had continued upstream, not troubling to conceal their trail.

"Follow them?" Alustriel asked.

Alassra shook her head. "Only if we need to. Open your mind. I'm noticing something very strange."

As a wizard, Alassra was more skilled than any of her sisters. On a good day and with the wind at her back, she could

sense things even the Old Mage missed. At that moment she sensed another corpse, not far from the stream and reeking of magic.

"Yes," Alustriel agreed after a moment. "A death gone wrong."

"My thoughts exactly."

Alassra led the way, readying spells as she walked. Behind her, she sensed Alustriel doing the same. If malice was loose in the Yuirwood this night, it was in for a thorough trouncing. They followed the trail of footprints and hoofprints some hundred paces before it and the sense of unrightness diverged. The Simbul drew no conclusions, but turned away from the marked trail.

Not far into the laurel and briar, they found what they were looking for: a corpse, man-shaped in the moonlight. Alustriel made a misty light and set it hovering over their heads. Alassra covered her mouth—a reflexive human reaction when confronted with deformity and mutilation. The High Lady of Silverymoon invoked Mystra's name; she cast several lesser spells against evil and one, which Alassra didn't recognize, that would have freed the man's spirit, had it remained trapped in the mangled body. It was the sort of compassion Alassra expected from and respected in her elder sister and that almost never occurred to her.

On the other hand, Alustriel was reluctant to get down on her knees for a closer look, which bothered Alassra not at all. Using the little wand she'd used to probe the Red Wizard corpses in Sulalk, she began her examination. The wand vibrated in her hand, discharging its particular magic and raising a pattern of incomplete tattoos.

"What the—?"

"That shouldn't have happened," Alustriel said, as much a question as an answer.

"I imagine he said the same thing, or tried to." Alassra resorted to acid humor as she sat back on her heels.

The corpse, already naked, cratered and broken, took on a

new awfulness beneath the wand's glowing magic. Gingerly, Alassra touched it again with the wand, lifting a hank of brittle hair away from its face, revealing two mouths, three eyes, and half a nose.

"A soured shapeshifting?" Alustriel suggested. "Illusion, perhaps, or necromancy, or something begun by a god?"

"Or a failed possession. Tried to swallow something and it swallowed him back." Alassra used the wand to expose the corpse's blasted abdomen. "Quite a stomachache."

"How can you make jokes?"

"How can I not?" Alassra stood up. "Someone who might have been a Red Wizard crossed paths with someone who might have been Cha'Tel'Quessir. One of them died, but which one?"

"Both of them, I should think."

"Then who was walking beside young Ebroin?"

"You think he's with . . . this? It... it doesn't look recent."

"Agreed. I'd say weeks, maybe months, if I'd come across it anywhere but here. Here is too close. I don't believe in coincidence."

Holding her gown carefully away from the corpse, Alustriel at last knelt down to examine it. "If it's not coincidence, there has to be cause. You didn't plan to come here: Your travel spell yawed. No one could have predicted that, or where you'd come out." Her hand wove above the corpse as she spoke. The luminous tattoos faded. She laid her bare hand on a malformed cheek. Within moments, her expression changed from puzzled to deeply concerned. "I like this not at all, Alassra."

"A coincidence?"

Alustriel ignored the jibe. "It is old—part of it, at any rate. You said you were displaced in time: Days? Months? Years?"

"Try centuries. Try millennia . . . several. The stars didn't match."

"Oh dear."

Alassra took her sister's hand, helping her to her feet and

saying, "I don't like the sound of that 'oh, dear'."

"Could anyone have followed you?"

"I couldn't have followed me. You couldn't—but someone did, don't you think?"

Alustriel nodded, then immediately shook her head. "It makes no sense."

"Welcome to the Yuirwood, sister. Stay here long enough and you'll get used to it." Alassra restored the glowing tattoos. Coincidence or not, there was none where the corpse's heart should have been. "It might not mean anything," she muttered. "That part might be pure Cha'Tel'Quessir. All the other tattoos stop and start. The fact that I can't determine which zulkir marked him might not mean anything at all."

With nothing more to be done or learned, the Simbul cast fire on the corpse. The sisters stood in respectful silence while hot, blue flames reduced it to a thin layer of ash that would disappear in the next rain.

"This is your forest, Alassra. What do we do now? Head back to the stream and follow that trail in its other direction?"

Alassra resisted the temptation. She was never without an arsenal of magic sufficient to get her—and a sister—out of any trouble she might find by accident, but the spells she had in mind weren't the ones she'd choose if she were actively looking for trouble.

"Bro could be in trouble," Alustriel said into the lengthening silence.

He could be dead, possessed, or worse. If it were as simple as rescuing one man from a Red Wizard, Alassra would have set after him in a heartbeat. But one man's safety wasn't sufficient reason to go raging through the Yuirwood, not tonight. Ebroin was in the thick of something much larger than himself.

"This wants thorough thinking, sister. It's time to go home and do it," the Simbul said, expecting an argument. "The gods of the Cha'Tel'Quessir will have to look out for him for a little while longer."

"And one of those gods is Zandilar."

Alassra nodded. "A goddess could solve all our problems with cause and coincidence. She must be involved, but after two years, I know precious little beyond what I knew that night when I first heard her name."

"Have you consulted with the elves?"

"With the Cha'Tel'Quessir. They know the name, but if they know more than that, they—the ones I know the best and trust the most—aren't saying anything. They know precious little of the old Yuirwood."

"I meant the Tel'Quessir, the sages of Evermeet."

The Simbul rolled her eyes. "The Cha'Tel'Quessir don't know Zandilar; why would the elves of Evermeet? They'd lost contact with the Yuir elves long before the Cha'Tel'Quessir began."

"The Yuir had lost contact with the Elven Court," Alustriel began, using a wise, patient tone guaranteed to set Alassra's teeth on edge.

"Sister, if you know that the damn elven sages know something, then say so."

Alustriel took a deep breath, drawing herself up to her full height, currently a finger's breadth above her sister. "The Yuir had become decadent. They were divided by petty wars and wracked by disease ... by disease, 'Las. You know Tel'Quessir almost never become physically unwell unless their spirits are unwell first. They don't talk about it, but I'm certain they know more than they've said and far more than the Cha'Tel'Quessir."

"I don't suppose you could coincidentally arrange a meeting with them?"

"I think they'd come to Everlund, if I were there with both you and them, in case there were disagreements."

Alassra shrugged off her sister's not-so-subtle criticism. "They behave; I behave. They become insufferable; I become insufferable."

"They're very old and very wise. You must make allowances."

"I'm getting to be quite old myself, Alustriel, and I don't suffer fools easily, no matter how old and wise they are." She held out her hands to whisk them both back to Velprintalar.

* * * * *

The room was welcome after the haunted shadows of the forest, though neither woman made a move toward the comfortable chairs. Alassra's eyes drifted toward her tidy bookshelves. After what she'd seen tonight, there were spells she didn't want to be without. There were folk she wanted to speak with, too: Cha'Tel'Quessir whose willingness to trust her with Yuirwood secrets was going to be tested. She made appointments in her mind.

"Will Everlund at sunset, three days from now, be acceptable, or do you want me to ask them to come sooner?"

With a bit of luck, in three days time Alassra could have the whole problem resolved and the meeting wouldn't take place. "Sunset, three days from now, will be ideal."

Alustriel's eyes narrowed. "Be careful, 'Las," she advised, as if she'd guessed her sister's plans. "Something happened to the Yuir and it would be bad for all Faerun if it started happening again. When you talk to your Cha'Tel'Quessir friends, ask them why there are two circles in the Sunblade." Alassra demanded, "What about the two—" but Alustriel had gone.

She could have followed her sister to Silverymoon. Perhaps that was what Alustriel hoped. If so, the High Lady was due for disappointment. An afternoon and evening of Alustriel's perfect company was enough. Sooner or later they'd have gotten into an argument, probably about the proper way for a queen to rule her country. No, Alassra would have argued, sworn, and shouted; her sister would have been pained and disappointed and eventually mentioned a need for diplomacy ...

In truth, Alassra didn't need to have her sister nearby in order to hear her describe how things were done in

Silverymoon. The High Lady never criticized or compared directly, but Alassra was sure Alustriel considered Aglarond to be a chaotic, ill-run realm, completely lacking in diplomacy.

"Try being diplomatic with the Red Wizards," Alassra told her absent sister.

She'd found the spellbook she wanted, had it open to the right page, but couldn't muster the concentration to commit a spell to memory.

"Or the Fangers, or, gods willing, the Cha'Tel'Quessir themselves. Things need to be done in Aglarond, not discussed into the ground."

Thunder shook the tower. The Inner Sea storm had arrived. Alassra could see the rain, backlit by brilliant sheets of lightning, whipping past, but not through, her bolt-hole windows. A score of times each summer, the palace had endured such storms and, mostly, ignored them because, for all their fury, summer storms changed little by their passage.

She was sometimes called the storm queen. She kept Aglarond safe—which was more than any summer storm could claim. But after fifty years, she was still fighting the same enemies with the same strategies.

Perhaps it wasn't that she needed an heir. Alustriel, after all, had twelve and the folk of Silverymoon would have revolted if she'd tried to put one or all of them in her place. Perhaps she just needed a change in strategies. Instead of raging through the Yuirwood like a summer storm, perhaps she should meet with the elves and hear them out. Instead of bashing heads, perhaps she should disguise herself as Cha'Tel'Quessir and discover their beliefs from the inside out.

14

Thazalhar, in eastern Thay

Late morning, the seventeenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Fresh from bathing, Lauzoril sauntered across the grassy yard between the estate house and the stables. He entered the stall of a black gelding, whose injured hoof was of some concern to him. His actions, however, once he'd closed the door behind him, had nothing to do with the horse.

With practiced movements, the zulkir fashioned bits of horse bedding into a palm-sized doll. When the twisting and tying was finished, he tossed the straw into the air, imbuing it with a spell that was both enchantment and illusion.

A sphere of red light surrounded the straw; a soft hum, as of a bee within a flower, filled the air. Lauzoril stood beside the gelding's head, whispering ordinary words to keep it calm. Light fell from the sphere like rain, shifted and become opaque. At first it had the crude shape of the straw man; within moments it had become the zulkir's double, casting a shadow, mirroring his gestures until he spoke a word in the old Mulhorandi dialect.

After that the double walked out of the stall. It hailed the hostlers by name and bade them continue with their labors. Slaves and freemen both returned their lord's friendly greeting, none suspecting that magic moved among them nor finding anything unusual in his cheerfulness.

Everyone on Lord Tavai's estate was well-fed, comfortably housed, and acutely aware of both their isolation and the less merciful conditions that prevailed elsewhere in Thay. Lauzoril insisted that mercy played no part in his decisions. Enchantment, he told himself, was a subtle art, and food was always less costly than magic. But he could never quite forget the mother he'd never known and hadn't found. He bought green-eyed slaves wherever he found them, questioned them about their kin, then sent them on to Thazalhar.

The lord's image strode toward the manor wall. When it had straddled the wall and begun its walk across the hills, Lauzoril withdrew his consciousness. Truly mindless, it would continue walking while he went, unobserved and unnoticed,

from the stable to the family crypt's concealed entrance. Lauzoril's face grew grim and angry as he descended the spiral stairs. Shimmering wards melted at his approach. The heavy door swung and crashed into the interior wall. He stood in the doorway, his fingers reciting an alphabet of magic, which, for the moment, he refrained from casting. The odor of burnt linen surrounded him. Within the crypt, Chazsinal's ebony chair lay on its side, Chazsinal still bound to its seat. Gweltaz's chair hovered above the floor. Gweltaz himself was a translucent apparition beside it, in full Red Wizard robes, tattoos, and rage.

"What fool—" the elder began, and got no further.

Lauzoril released a gout of fire magic that pinned his grandfather's chair in the juncture of two walls and the ceiling. A cocoon of flame formed around him. The apparition vanished; the howls within the flames were loud and piteous, and had no effect on Lauzoril—except that he closed the crypt door.

"Lauzoril, Lauzoril—release him!" Chazsinal, ever his father's dutiful son, pleaded with his own offspring from his place facedown on the floor. "Release him! You'll regret this, Lauzoril!"

The cocoon vanished. Gweltaz, in singed and reeking linen, dropped to the floor. His chair balanced upright for a heartbeat—Lauzoril's heartbeat—then toppled sideways.

"This changes nothing," Gweltaz snarled.

"I am accustomed to disappointment, Grandfather."

"Right me."

"Can't do it yourself?" Lauzoril inquired, his silky voice laced with venom.

Gweltaz said nothing. Chazsinal had less fortitude.

"Lauzoril, there was cause."

"Tell me," the zulkir ordered, no change in his tone. His father's chair righted itself.

"We discerned a change—"

"Tell him nothing, Chaz!" Gweltaz commanded. "If he will not

ask for our help, let him do without. The Mighty Zulkir of Enchantment and Charm!"

"Ask for your help? What could either of you tell me that I don't already know? That there was a standoff in Aglarond? That we destroyed a meaningless village and the Simbul destroyed twelve of us, including one of mine? Did you think I didn't know? Shall I tell you their names?"

"Aglarond!" Gweltaz shouted. "Forget Aglarond, Mighty Fool, Scry your attention closer to home, to Bezantur. Invocation and Illusion move against each other. Your ally and our enemy's."

"Not against each other, Grandfather. Lord Thrul has wards and guards around Serpent Tower. Lady Illusion has appealed to her master, Szass Tam, who hears but does not move against anything these days."

Chazsinal strained within his bandages. "See? He knows!"

The other chair rose slowly from the floor. It had almost righted itself when Lauzoril crooked his finger. "When I'm ready." He flung the chair at the wall.

The mummy groaned, gave up a cloud of dust, and said, "Such temper, boy! Will you do the same when Szass Tam comes looking for you?"

Lauzoril spun Gweltaz's chair wildly before sitting down in his own and propping his feet on the table. "Szass Tam. Szass Tam. Lady Illusion may beg, but her master will not fight for her."

"He will fight against Lord Thrul and against you, who allied yourself with Invocation."

The zulkir smiled, a gesture not lost on Gweltaz although the chair was front-down on the floor again. "Alliances fade, Grandfather. Mine with Thrul is fading fast."

Lauzoril allowed the chair to rotate a half-turn. The wrappings had loosened. Gweltaz's head flopped on his shoulder. Light seeped through gaps in his legs and torso. Repairs were needed, and soon, or the necromancer's spirit would slip into torpor and, eventually, ultimate death.

Chazsinal twitched; Lauzoril asked himself if the time hadn't come to be rid of rancorous confidants.

His grasp of both wizardry and politics had improved since he'd gone searching for the father whose name he'd discovered in his predecessor's archives. At the beginning, Gweltaz's timely warnings about plots a young zulkir never sensed had kept Lauzoril alive when none of his peers believed he would survive a year. Even now, his grandfather's insight into the realm of the dead and undead was an asset no enchanter could acquire for himself.

But Chazsinal possessed the same insight albeit, untrusted and untrained. Might not Chazsinal be a less troublesome advisor—at least until his daughter matured. Mimuay had astonished—the word was scarcely strong enough—her father with the all-innocence-and-ignorance request that he teach her the arts of necromancy. He'd assumed, when she asked him to share his gift, that it was the spells of enchantment that she wanted, but she was Thazalhar bred, and death was ingrained on her life.

The dead are here in Thazalhar. They're my friends; I hear them everywhere, she'd said two mornings ago when he allowed her into his above-ground workroom and tried, with a variety of foul and slimy reagents, to discourage her from following in his footsteps.

Mimuay had turned pale and nearly fainted, but her father was the one who failed. By noon she'd cast her first cantrip: turning a white rose blue and keeping it that way while Lauzoril counted very slowly to ten.

"A smile, Mighty Zulkir?" Gweltaz's voice was weaker but not his scorn. "Does it please you so much to abandon a son's obligations to his fathers?"

Lauzoril had slouched in his chair, thinking about possibilities and his daughter. He sat bolt upright at the sound of his grandfather's question and made a decision as well. Without responding directly to Gweltaz's accusations, he unlocked a compartment beneath the tabletop.

No enchanter could cast the spells of necromancy, nor safely handle its artifacts. The prohibition didn't arise from Red Wizard tradition. If that had been the case, every Wizard would have disregarded it. The prohibition went deeper than that. Some said the goddess Mystra or her lackey, Azuth, were responsible. Others placed the blame on Ao, the god of gods. All agreed, however, that the prohibition was absolute and while there were many spells that he and his necromancer kin knew in common, the spells that preserved their consciousness weren't among them.

The spells to restore Gweltaz's bandages, however, could be learned and cast by any mage, or sealed within an object—a seed, such as the flaxseed sparkling in the table compartment, charged with the dual magic of mending and permanency. Lauzoril scooped up a thimbleful and blew them across the room. They settled on the flattened, singed bandages and immediately the tattered edges repaired themselves.

Lauzoril nodded in satisfaction. He and Gweltar squabbled and might yet kill each other, but the line between family and outside was clear, especially when an ethereal wind rattled the estate's distant boundary wards. Someone powerful—a zulkir, at least—was looking for Lauzoril. Wand in hand, the zulkir climbed partway up the stairs. His thoughts merged with the estate's subtle defenses. He watched, listened, and returned to the crypt.

"There'll be a second," Chazsinal said.

As usual, the other two wizards ignored him, but this time Chazsinal guessed correctly.

"Invocation," Lauzoril acknowledged. "Looking for me."

"Because Szass Tam is looking for you both." Gweltaz referred to the first probe, which had been particularly cold and dark. "Best think again about Bezantur. What will you do?"

"Nothing unseemly. Nothing foolish. Nothing eager. There's something afoot in the Yuirwood. No one knows its name or

its power ... yet. Not tanar'ri—nothing so powerful as an arch-fiend—but easier, perhaps, to control. Lord Thrul wants it for himself. Likewise Lady Illusion. We need not guess at Szass Tam's interest. But enchantment has an advantage. I have an advantage, and perhaps I will get there first to claim it. Alliances fade."

Dead black eyes manifested on Gweltaz's bandages. "You're not ready. That alliance with Lord Thrul was unwise, but it would be more unwise to end it now," he insisted, then the eyes became translucent, thoughtful. "No," his ghostly, raspy voice mused. "No, you wouldn't."

Lauzoril said nothing.

"You are a fool, an utter fool. You'll destroy us all."

"You've been destroyed once, Grandfather. The experience has made you over-cautious."

"This is not about caution, it's about recklessness, foolishness, blindness."

The discussion had surpassed Chazsinal's understanding. He sputtered his confusion. "What is? What are you two talking about?"

"Him!" Gweltaz swore. "Him! He would throw revenge away for a whim. For a woman! He believes his trinket gives him an advantage in Aglarond. He believes he can charm the witch-queen!"

The dagger hadn't entered Lauzoril's calculations. Since that night when his thoughts had merged directly with hers, his contacts had been both fleeting and—to be honest—confusing. Although the impressions came more frequently, they had a very different texture. He seriously considered the possibility that she'd given the knife to someone else, someone much younger and certainly no wizard.

The dagger hadn't given him anything about the Simbul's rampage. That knowledge, in addition to sketchy notions of a new power rising in the Yuirwood itself came from an altogether different source: A message from his chancellor of Enchantment in Bezantur.

The chancellor had had a visitor, a flighty woman with too much gold and a wayward husband—the sort of client whom enchanters had drawn since the dawn of magic. Once they were alone, however, the client had shed her flighty disguise. She claimed to be a Red Wizard, an invoker by training, and a privileged member of Thrul's household: the master of his spy web.

To prove her claim, the woman, who hadn't revealed her name, offered information about Aglarond, about Zulkir and Tharchion Aznar Thrul, and about Lauzoril himself.

Thrul had humiliated his spy master, belittled her advice, demeaned the sacrifice of her spies. She wanted revenge, no different than Gweltaz and Chazsinal. Her terms were very specific: gold, manpower, an impervious bolt-hole, and whatever spellcraft not barred to enchantment that she needed for her work in exchange for the intelligence that would bring Aznar Thrul down.

Before Thrul disposed of his erstwhile ally, Lauzoril.

It could be a trap, one of the oldest gambits in the vast repertoire of Red Wizard deceit and betrayal. Lauzoril wasn't truly surprised that the contempt he directed toward Aznar Thrul was reciprocated. For almost a year, he'd suspected that Invocation, rather than Necromancy, was the ultimate employer of the assassins who crossed his path with increasing frequency. At best, theirs was an uneasy alliance: The modes of invocation were as forbidden to enchanters as those of necromancy and all the more reason to view this nameless woman with suspicion.

Yet view her Lauzoril would. Before dawn tomorrow, he'd mount his stone horse for the journey to Bezantur and a very private meeting outside the city proper. If the spy master persuaded him of her sincerity and authenticity, he'd trade one untrustworthy ally for another.

That was the way in Thay: Things changed. A week ago his daughter had been an innocent child, now she'd taken her first steps along the dangerous path of magic and mastery. A

week ago, Lauzoril's alliance with Thrul had been a stalemate and the zulkir-tharchion had had a loyal spy master.

But mostly, things did not change. If Thrul fell, another invoker—possibly the spy master herself—would take his place. Zulkirs could depose one another, but never usurp them. Their number and need for alliance was constant. As was the carping Lauzoril endured from his ancestors.

"Aglarond's queen is immune to your most potent spells." Chazsinal's voice hung on the edge of hysteria. "She will annihilate you, and us, too."

Gweltaz weighed in with his opinion. "Better to be dust and memories than slaves of an imbecile. There can be but one purpose for your life, O Mighty Zulkir: Bring down Szass Tam. Anything else clutters your mind, wastes your time, and exposes you to his wrath."

The Mighty Zulkir had had enough for one afternoon. He'd quenched another of Gweltaz's periodic rebellions; that was his reason for coming to the crypt. He'd had a foretaste of the pleasure he'd have when he told them that Mimuyay was learning magic and was almost pleased that he'd been interrupted. The longer he kept Mimuyay's secret, the greater his ancestors' dismay, the greater his own pleasure.

Lauzoril left the crypt, ignoring their objections and pleas. There was another changeless aspect to his life, one which, like the estate itself and his daughters, cleansed his mind when he'd grown too comfortable with cruelty and power. He met himself coming through the ruins and, disposing of the straw enchantment, returned to the estate-house where he found his wife embroidering in a shaded atrium.

"My prince!"

Wenne cast aside her cloth and threads. Lauzoril glimpsed a band of heraldic griffins, each different and remarkable, before she threw herself against him.

"I did not think you'd find me before sundown."

Sheer joy sparkled in her eyes before they closed and she

tightened her arms again.

"Your smile haunts my every thought, dear lady," he replied.

"I had to find you or go mad."

A statement not so very far from the truth. Lauzoril freed his ribs and raised her hand to his lips for a storybook kiss. It took one kind of madness to stave off another. Wenne wrested free. She retrieved her discarded work.

"It's almost finished. You must try it on, my prince."

He took the shirt in his hands. She attacked the shirt he wore. All her considerable magic was in her fingers.

"Not here, dear lady," he insisted before she had him naked.

Still clutching the griffin shirt, Lauzoril carried his wife to their bedchamber. Secure behind a wizard-locked door, he let her strip his shirt away and made an honest effort to pull the other over his head. Wenne put a stop to that; she always did. Wanton fingers caressed his chest and flanks, fascinated by his various scars, but never—never—exploring the oldest scar of all: the swirling tattoo her grandfather had placed above his heart.

15

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Mid-afternoon, the seventeenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

When he was a boy, Bro couldn't imagine an empty horizon. Then his father had died, and his mother led him away from MightyTree. Two days' walking and the Yuirwood had been behind them.

Had she known the one, fast path out of the forest? he'd demanded, unwilling to take another step in a treeless world. Shali had taken his hand; she hadn't known where the Yuirwood ended, only that if they walked north from MightyTree it would end before the second sunset. Bro remembered that her hand had been cold and shaking and that neither of them had slept that night, huddled beneath countless hungry stars.

By now, Bro had gotten used to fields of grass around him

and fields of stars overhead. It was trees that made him nervous halfway through the third day following Rizcarn. They'd traveled through a Yuirwood so dissimilar from the forest he remembered that he wondered if they weren't somewhere altogether different. He'd considered that they were traveling east or west—the Yuirwood was much longer than it was wide—but whenever he sighted sun and shadow, it seemed they were walking north, the same way he and Shali had walked seven years ago.

Seemed, because Bro hadn't made many sightings. The sky had stormed or threatened rain since the morning after he'd met Rizcarn. Rizcarn might be leading him and the colt in circles, though that seemed unlikely. They'd been places that he hoped were unique and would certainly stir his memory if he saw them again.

The first day they'd scaled a ridge of shattering slate, made doubly treacherous by a blinding rain. He'd pled with Rizcarn to wait until the rain eased or look for a way around. Hooves, he'd shouted through the wind and thunder, weren't meant for slick rocks. Rizcarn didn't answer, didn't even slow down. Bro got Dancer across. They both fell a few times, getting bruised and scraped in the process. Rizcarn said it was Bro's fault for not trusting Relkath Many-limbed.

Bro hadn't raised any objections last night, at twilight, when Rizcarn led them into a quaking bog where the rising mists had malevolent eyes. He whispered Relkath's name at every step and kept a firm grip on Dancer's lead rope. Now they were in a swamp, surrounded by dead trees, looking for all the world like bony hands rising out of the murk. The dark water was mirror smooth—except for the V-shaped ripples that matched their pace for a little while, then disappeared.

Bro swore he'd add the swamp to the places he never wanted to revisit. Foul-smelling muck surrounded his feet with every heavy step, ruining the Simbul's fine boots. Yet neither the muck nor the trolling predators were the worst part of the swamp.

He'd never given much thought to insects, except when hunting honey trees with his cousins. Today, every step stirred up a new horde to join the dark clouds already hovering around his heads. The stinging, buzzing, crawling, itching, scratching creatures pushed him and Dancer to the edge of madness. Resting, though, was the worst of all. The moment Bro sank down on a damp, rotting tree trunk, there were ten bugs for every one there'd been before. They swarmed in his ears, followed sweat tracks down his back, and attacked his flesh as if it were the Midwinter feast.

If Bro had been a year or three younger, he'd have done something foolish: refused to take another mucky step, walked off on his own, or hung his head and bawled. But he was a man. He sat, suffered, and tried very hard not to think about anything at all.

Zandilar's Dancer wasn't a man. A colt couldn't reason his way through misery. He'd been fractious when they'd first entered the swamp. He'd kicked and snapped at everything, including Bro, who'd held his lead rope. Now, his twilight coat was streaky black with sweat and swamp water. His head hung and his tail was the only part of him that moved constantly.

Bro abandoned his rotted log and stood at Dancer's flank where swishing horsehair protected him as well. Rizcarn took Bro's movement as a sign that he was rested and, without a word, started walking again. Wearily, Bro untied the rope.

A light rain fell, sluicing sweat from Bro's skin and driving the bugs away. But the relief was short-lived: The air warmed when the rain ended; the bugs were worse than ever. Wisps rose from stagnant water, larger and more menacing than the ones in the bog. Bro no longer wanted to rest and feared nothing more than the chance that Rizcarn would call a halt for the night before the swamp was behind them.

"Relkath protects, son," Rizcarn said with a laugh after Bro succumbed to a spate of furious slaps at his sodden trousers.

"Have faith."

It was Rizcarn's friendliest statement since they'd started walking.

"I'm trying." Bro took a chance, adding, "It might help, though, if I knew where we're going or why."

"Relkath protects. What more is necessary?"

Bro stopped walking. "I'm hungry," he said evenly. "Bugs or no bugs, Dancer and I need food. More than that, I need to know where we're going and when we'll get out of this swamp. I need answers, Rizcarn, or I'm turning around while there's still light to leave."

"As you will, son."

Rizcarn held out his hand, not for a parting handshake, but for the lead rope. Bro refused to surrender it.

"Answers, Father."

Rizcarn turned away; he stared at the stagnant water. Bro put his shoulder against Zandilar, ready to turn the colt on the narrow high-ground path they'd been following.

"There's an island rise beyond that." Rizcarn pointed to a line of skeletal trees shrouded in hanging vines. "You want food, son, you'll find it there. Rest, too, though not as long as you or Zandilar's Dancer would like. We've got to move smartly. This is no place to be after sundown."

Bro couldn't argue that, but he needed more before he'd lead Dancer across the flooded mire.

"Where are we going, Father? How long until we get there?"

Rizcarn reverted to his most inscrutable. "Zandilar waits. Relkath protects." He waded into the dark water.

Bro looked back the way they'd come. Their tracks were easy enough to follow in the soft ground, but swamps weren't as still as they first appeared. Water seeped into Dancer's hoofprints even as he watched. The tracks they'd made this morning entering the swamp were almost certainly gone, and Relkath's protection wasn't likely to follow him if he walked away from Rizcarn.

He tightened his grip on the lead rope. Muck closed over his

ankles at every step, but the water itself never rose above his waist and Dancer's only thought was to stay close. The largest snake Bro had ever seen lurked in the vines overhanging the island's banks. As thick as Bro's thigh and unknowably long, it watched them approach with malevolent ruby eyes and dropped into the water as they passed.

"We're too big for it," Rizcarn laughed. "That makes it angry. It thinks of its grandfather, who could squeeze the life from the colt, and wishes it were full-grown. Just like you, son. Just like you. Eat your enemies, son, before they eat you."

Do I have enemies now? The question popped, unwelcome, into Bro's mind. Are you my enemy, Rizcarn?

Then it was time to start swimming. The water deepened near the island and they had to fight an unexpected current. Bro let Dancer pull him. He held onto the lead rope as the colt surged out of the water and was a half-breath too late letting go once Dancer had solid ground beneath his hooves. After adding new bruises to his old ones, Bro crawled to the verge, where he offered Rizcarn a boost.

Arm against arm and so close that Bro could smell the other man's breath, they stared into each other's eyes. Bro had thrown up a mighty wall between present and past when he started walking behind Rizcarn. He hadn't thought about Sulalk or his mother in nearly three days. Suddenly, the wall crumbled. He wanted this man to be his father; he didn't want to be an orphan.

Rizcarn pulled away before he found the right words.

"Over there." Rizcarn pointed at a toppled tree. "Food's there."

Despite the summer heat, Bro felt bone cold as he followed Rizcarn, wondering how Rizcarn had known the island was here, much less the tree.

The food was a mottled fungus called tree ears that grew in thick ridges along the trunk. Rizcarn swore it was wholesome. He broke off an ear the size of his forearm and

bit in. Bro's mouth was sour and pasty. What else, he asked himself, had he expected? From the start Rizcarn's caches had been rotting carrion. At least tree ears were wholesome. Shali floated them in his favorite stews. He'd never eaten one raw ...

There had to be a first time for everything.

Snapping off a more modest piece than Rizcarn, Bro sniffed it—it had no odor—touched it to his tongue—it had no noticeable taste—then, when Rizcarn began to laugh, shoved it into his mouth. The texture wasn't as bad as he'd feared, and the taste, after he'd chewed it a while, was almost pleasant. Sitting beside his dinner, he pulled off a chunk the size of his fist. He'd gnawed through two larger chunks before he was finished.

Bro finished his meal with a drink of the fast-flowing water around the island's edge. For the first time since that last night in Sulalk, his stomach was full.

"How long before we have to start walking again?" Bro asked when he rejoined Rizcarn.

Rizcarn looked at the sky where a bright spot marked the sun's place behind the clouds.

"Rest, son. Sleep, if you need to. I'll watch the colt and wake you when it's time."

The thought occurred to Bro, as he stretched out in the grass, that Rizcarn might head off with the colt while he napped. Zandilar's Dancer was more important to Rizcarn than he was. But Dancer wouldn't go quietly without him holding the rope. Confident that the colt would awaken him, if Rizcarn didn't, Bro closed his eyes.

It seemed that no time had passed when Rizcarn shook him awake.

"Time to go, son."

Rizcarn offered his hand, which Bro took, bounding to his feet and regretting it immediately. The island swayed and Bro swayed with it, barely keeping his balance. His gut rebelled. He lurched toward the water, clutching his sides.

He didn't make it, but fell, retching, in the grass. His joints ached, as if there was a knife wedged in every one.

When Rizcarn appeared at his side, Bro blurted out one word, "Poison," and retched again.

With the few clear thoughts left in his skull, Bro doubted his own judgment: Rizcarn wasn't ill. Of course, seven years ago, Rizcarn had been rotting dead, just like the tree. Bro stopped thinking. He sipped water his father brought him, then closed his eyes and waited to die.

"Are you well yet?" Rizcarn asked.

Bro opened his eyes. The sky was noticeably dimmer than he remembered it and streaked with red and orange, blue and purple.

"Can you walk? We must start walking. I told you, this is no place to be after sundown."

Walk? Bro couldn't raise his head without pain, but his thoughts were clear: If he wasn't dead, then he didn't want to be in the swamp. With Rizcarn's help, he got to his feet. Clinging to his father, he took a few steps, then a few more, but walking proved impossible.

"I can't, Father. Sorry. Dying. Can't eat what you eat."

Rizcarn's eyes were dancing flames in a face that blurred and seemed less man-like the longer Bro looked at it.

"A few tree ears?" Rizcarn scoffed, sounding more like the father Bro remembered than he had earlier. "More than a few. You've eaten yourself sick, son, but you're not dying. You can walk it off."

He leaned on his father a few more steps, then his legs gave out. Rizcarn caught him as he fell.

"Ride, then. Zandilar's Dancer can carry you."

Bro wasn't too far gone to miss the concession, but the true meaning—if it were more than Rizcarn's belated concern—escaped him. The grass had turned as orange as the sky. Dancer was brilliant blue, except for his eyes, which shone like the sun at sunrise. After Bro tried to explain that everything looked very different, very strange and colorful,

Rizcarn brought him more water.

If he weren't already poisoned, Bro was certain he would be if he let the black ooze in Rizcarn's hands touch his lips. Then a luminous green worm wound itself around Rizcarn's thumb. The worm extended its head and opened a single, blood-streaked eye. Bro staggered backward.

But things got better once Bro was astride Dancer. With his eyes closed and his arms wrapped around the colt's neck, he could let his overheated imagination wander to pleasanter places: springtime meadows around Sulalk, autumn in the Yuirwood he remembered, all the places he'd ever wanted to see from Dancer's back.

Bro heard the sucking mud, as Rizcarn guided Dancer through the swamp, but the sound was distant, easily excluded from the visions swirling behind his closed eyes. He could hear the ever-present insects, too, but the swarms were clever enough not to feast on a doomed Cha'Tel'Quessir. Once—just once—Bro opened his eyes. The bones in his arms, the bones in Dancer's neck were shining jewels visible through translucent flesh. Looking down, he could see Dancer's heart, a pulsing ruby, and his own, which seemed smaller . . . darker . . . dying. He closed his eyes more tightly than before but the bones were etched behind his eyes, and the pleasanter visions wouldn't return.

Dancer stopped beneath him. Rizcarn grasped his arm and shook it.

"We've come to the river."

Aglarond had streams aplenty but only one river, the River Umber, flowing out of Thay to the Sea of Dlurg on the northern coast. Bro had never seen the Umber. He opened his eyes. The sky was purple, the evening stars were green and the ribbon of water before them was the color of milk.

"Zandilar's Dancer must swim again." Rizcarn took Bro's wrist and knotted the lead rope around it. "And you'll have to tell him."

The swamp was a step or two behind them. Bro suggested

they could camp on the river bank.

"On the other side, son."

"I can't see right," he protested, not adding that he could still see his bones and Dancer's, but that Rizcarn had none. Rizcarn was a voice and a shadow. Another time, that might have disturbed Bro. Confronted with his own skeleton, though, his father's featureless shape was oddly reassuring. "I can't ride—not like lord or knight. What if I fall off? I won't know which way to swim."

Rizcarn tugged on the rope. "That's what this is for: to keep you and Zandilar's Dancer together. I'll find you, son, wherever the colt fetches up, but it would be better if you stay astride."

"If I can—"

"No ifs, Ebroin," Rizcarn said as he whacked the colt's rump hard.

Dancer leapt into the water. The river wasn't wide, if Bro could believe anything his addled eyes perceived, but it proved deep and swift. The colt was swimming from the start, his legs churning steadily, powerfully. He tried to return to the bank where they'd started.

"Tell him where to go!" Rizcarn shouted.

Zandilar's Dancer was an even-tempered, but untrained colt. Bro was a panicked Cha'Tel'Quessir who knew no more about riding a horse than Dancer knew about being ridden. On land, trust and luck kept them together. In the river, they needed more than either knew how to give. Shouting and throwing clots of mud, Rizcarn kept them from returning to the near bank, but convincing Dancer not to turn around wasn't the same as convincing him to swim for the far bank. Without firm guidance, he wanted nothing to do with either bank and, once in the current, headed downstream.

"Tell him, Ebroin!"

Dancer wasn't listening to anything except himself. He'd decided where he was going, and his neck was stronger than Bro's arms. Rizcarn's shouts had faded; the milk-colored

water had turned a bloody red under an equally bloody sky. In last-ditch desperation, Bro wriggled forward until his legs clamped around Dancer's shoulders and his free hand grabbed the halter.

"Over there!" he screamed as he pulled with all his strength. "To the land!"

The colt's body followed his head. Bro released the halter when the far bank was directly in front of them. A heartbeat later he realized he should have turned Dancer upstream, but at least the colt was swimming crosscurrent, and when the bank didn't shout or throw things at him, Dancer decided land was the place he wanted to be. After that, there was nothing Bro could have done to keep the colt in the river.

The riverbank was higher than the swamp island had been. Dancer tried twice before his hooves found solid ground, then he shook like a wet dog, from nose to tail. With neither saddle nor reins to help him, Bro lost his never-secure perch and tumbled to the ground, twisting his tied-up arm in the process.

The best horse in the world was a skittish creature, apt to shy at anything, friend or foe. After all he'd been through, Zandilar's Dancer shied mightily when Bro yelped. He took off at a trot, dragging Bro beside him. Soaked and swollen, the serpent knot at Bro's translucent wrist wouldn't yield to his frantic fingers until he remembered the Simbul's knife, secure in its sheath. Its blade—ordinary steel in Bro's otherwise addled vision—cut the rope cleanly, though he nicked himself before he got free.

Dancer took off, an apparition of glowing bones and barely visible flesh galloping across blue-green grass. Bro gave up the chase before it started. He was nauseous again, and the cuts on his forearm stung. When the stinging spread up his arm, Bro suspected magic and, remembering the seelie, kept hold of the hilt as he dropped to the ground.

He blacked out when the stinging reached his heart. When

he recovered consciousness, the land around him was night-dark, as it should have been. The nausea had passed. Hard, itching scabs sealed the cut he'd given himself. Without thinking, Bro scratched the itch. The scab fell away; his skin was smooth.

A crescent moon had cut through the clouds. It shed enough light to distinguish shape from shadow. Bro was out of the swamp, out of the Yuirwood, maybe out of Aglarond altogether. He had to find the colt and Rizcarn or else he was going to have to find his way home alone.

After wringing out his hair, clothes, and boots, Bro stood up. He felt refreshed and more confident than he'd been since the witch-queen vanished with Tay-Fay. He could think of his sister now, think of Shali, Dent, and all the horrors of that morning, without fighting tears. Bro still blamed the Simbul for all that had happened, but if he met her again—which he hoped he never would—he'd thank her for the knife.

With a hand on the studded hilt protruding from its sheath, Bro started walking upstream. He had no fear and wasn't unstrung when Rizcarn, leading Dancer, separated from the darkness.

"You're better now, son."

Bro shrugged. No reason to tell Rizcarn about his knife. "Grandfather always said terror could cure anything from hiccoughs to fevers. I'm so cured I could walk until dawn, if that's what you want."

"Not so far or long, son. We're almost there."

Rizcarn started walking away from the river. Bro followed, leading the colt by the rope.

"This was forest once, long before the Cha'Tel'Quessir were born," Rizcarn explained, more talkative than he'd been before. "See . . . over there. That's where Zandilar danced with the hunters."

Bro sighted along his father's arm and saw the stones, a score of them at least, heaved into the night. He touched the knife; his fingers tingled.

"Is she there, Father? Am I—? Is she going to dance with me, as she promised?" After today, Bro didn't want to dance with anything magical.

"Zandilar keeps her promises." There was, unexpectedly, a hint of concern and caution in Rizcarn's voice. "But not tonight, I think. Later. Best it were later, son. Relkath protects."

The stones rose haphazardly from the ground, no two the same height or angle, completely unlike the measured stone circles of the Yuirwood. Bro worried that they were no part of his heritage, until he stood close to one and studied its markings. He couldn't read the runes his elven ancestors carved on trees and stones alike, but he recognized them and was reassured.

"Magnar." He touched one of the more common carvings. That last summer, when he'd followed his father through the forest, they'd carved Relkath's name into the trees, but they'd carved Magnar's name whenever they'd found a moss-covered boulder. "The stones remember."

"No time to awaken the stones, son. We're here for Zandilar." Bro wasn't terribly surprised when Rizcarn produced a pair of silver pipes. He'd never heard his father play, but it was a rare Cha'Tel'Quessir who couldn't coax a melody from the pipes. He wasn't terribly concerned that the melody was unfamiliar and grew less disciplined as Rizcarn wove from one stone to the next. Though he'd been a child when he left the Yuirwood, he'd heard about moonlight revels where everyone danced themselves to exhaustion. If Zandilar were going to dance, he imagined she'd prefer wild music. Just so long as she didn't expect him to dance with her.

His trust vanished when they reached the center of the ancient stones. A large stone lay flat, its visible surface covered with swirling marks that weren't like any runes Bro had ever seen. When he stared at them, his body began to weave in rhythm with Rizcarn's music. He walked forward, toward the stone until he tripped and, aware that there was

magic in the air, wrapped his hand firmly around the hilt of his knife.

Immune to both his father's music and the meandering swirls, Bro noticed the hole at the stone's center. No bigger around than a circle made by the thumb and fingers of both hands, it was unnaturally dark and cold in his night vision. He'd opened his mouth, to call it to Rizcarn's attention, when he noticed a pale, thin mist rising from its depths. Bro's hand tingled, then the hilt itself seemed to freeze in his hand, a warning, he supposed, that Zandilar's magic was stronger. He tried to turn around and found that, though his thoughts remained his own, his feet did not. It was stand still or move toward the stone and the mist.

Bro kept a grip on Dancer's halter while the mist thickened into the goddess herself. The lithe figure had a woman's arms and legs, but it was taller than him and its body was shimmering, featureless light.

"My servant," Zandilar said in a voice so resonant that Bro couldn't guess whether it came from a god or a goddess.

Rizcarn lowered the pipes from his lips and sank to his knees. "Your servant."

Then Zandilar looked at Bro. The knife burned in his hand. He could neither speak nor breathe until Zandilar turned away.

"We thought you would never return, but you have, and you have done well. The beast is worthy."

Bro gasped. The hilt had gone cold again; his heart was colder. He didn't like the implications of her words, the beast is worthy; Dancer wasn't a beast. He recognized the voice that had spoken to him the day the colt was born, though it no longer seemed lighthearted or flirtatious.

"Is it enough, Zandilar? Will you dance in the Sunblade? Will you choose your consort?"

"In the 'Glade, when the moon is full."

The mist extended its arms, which wrapped, cloudlike and glowing softly with their own light, around Rizcarn's neck.

His face vanished. There was a sound like a deeply passionate kiss. Modesty proved stronger than curiosity; Bro stared at his toes.

"I will know." The voice was that of a man locked in a dream. Bro ground his teeth together to keep from screaming. Then he felt a hand—a soft, warm woman's hand—caress his neck and jaw, relaxing each muscle it touched, lifting his chin as if it were a feather. She was beautiful. Her skin was as blue as a clear, autumn sky. Her eyes were sunshine. He was young and utterly inexperienced, but all her lovers had been inexperienced at first.

Zandilar's face drew so close that Bro closed his eyes. He felt her lips against his and, scared for reasons that had nothing to do with magic or gods, squeezed his knife's hilt until it cut his palm. Suddenly, he was alone. The mist was formless and Rizcarn was angry.

"Surrender him! The horse is not yours. The horse has always belonged to Zandilar. Has living among dirt-eaters made you forget what you owe to our gods, Ebroin?"

Bro remembered Zandilar riding into the mist the day Dancer was born. That much was true: Dancer had never belonged to him.

"What will you do with him?" he asked, his voice steadier than he'd dared hope.

"Dance in the Sunglade when the moon is full. Dance with another, instead of you, silly young man."

For a heartbeat, Bro believed he'd lost something more precious than his mother's love. Then, with the knife hilt stinging his palm, he saw danger for him and the colt he'd raised. He saw, as well, that no matter what he did, the colt was doomed: Zandilar would have Dancer, had always had him. Bro found the strength to release the knife and wrap his arms around a trusting neck, to hide his face in a coarse, black mane.

"Good-bye," he whispered, not a word he'd trained the colt to understand.

Then, with a last pat, he offered the rope to Zandilar who had no use for it. Her mist-made form dissolved around the colt, obscuring him, consuming him, drawing him back into the small, dark hole.

Bro had expected her to ride away on Dancer's back, as she had in his vision. He hadn't expected the colt to completely disappear. A macabre progression formed in his thoughts: Shali's corpse had been whole, Dent's had been half-gone, Dancer was wholly gone. It meant nothing; nothing had meaning any more. Bro was back where he'd been in the stable: deaf and numb but without Dancer, without even his human sister to keep him moving.

"It's time to leave," Rizcarn said. Bro hadn't noticed him approaching or felt his hand on his arm. "You angered her. Disappointed her."

Bro shook his head.

"The moon's waning, Ebroin. There's much to do between now and when it's full again. We'll meet Zandilar in the Sunblade. Maybe you'll get another chance, son. Maybe. I can't say, but you're still with me, and I've got much to do."

Bro shook his head again. Rizcarn's hand was warm on his arm, but there was no way he could pretend that it was his father's hand, no way to pretend that he wasn't an orphan. Worse than an orphan. He was a man in a world of trouble with no where to go but forward, following the man who had once been his father back across the river.

16

The Black Citadel in the city of Bezantur, in Thay
Afternoon, the eighteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

For the first time in over a month, a cool breeze had freshened over Bezantur Harbor. It cleansed the city, awakening it from stagnant dreams. In Bezantur's one thousand fabled temples, priests and acolytes invoked their deities with prayers for High Harvest, the season that followed Reeking Heat. Ordinary folk smiled at the sun; they

greeted their loved ones and neighbors like long-lost friends. On a balcony overlooking the slave market, Aznar Thrul waited impatiently while a trio of terrified gnolls arranged an early supper on a gilded table.

The Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir had plans for the evening: a visit to the citadel dungeons, which he hadn't visited during the Heat, to savor a torture session without sharing it. Afterward, he planned a midnight visit to the locked chamber where Bezantur's former tharchion awaited his pleasure. Awaited was, perhaps, too strong a word. Mari Agneh scarcely comprehended that she was alive. Thrul had bound his predecessor in a web of spells that left her worse than dead. She, who had once sent armies against him, had become a painted doll, sating his whims and those of his other guests. The pleasure was always his, never hers.

For a month, Aznar Thrul had lived the boring life of an ascetic, cut off from the diversions of the flesh. However much he cherished the power that went with his dual titles, there were times when the zulkir and tharchion yearned for the simpler days of his youth, when life was all potential, little responsibility, and every night belonged to him alone.

The naked gnolls finished setting out his supper. They kowtowed on the marble floor, then backed through the open door, their eyes averted from his majesty. Thrul removed a gnarled amber rod from the sleeve of his velvet robe. Holding it precisely between his thumb and index finger, he passed it carefully over each dish on the table, each plate, knife, fork, and spoon. He touched the rim of three crystal goblets, the ewers of wine, nectar, and water as well. There were no sparks, no foul emanations; the food was pure enough for a zulkir and tharchion to eat. He was mildly disappointed: fresh prisoners were better subjects in the torture chamber.

But as the meal was wholesome, there was nothing to do but eat. Thrul began with a plate of jellied eggs on a bed of pickled rice. Picking up a knife very similar to the ones his

torturers used, he made delicate cuts across the green ovals. Albumen parted like virgin flesh; blood-red yolks glistened within. He stabbed each of them and smiled as the viscous yolk fluid seeped into the rice.

It was almost too pretty, too metaphoric to eat, but he'd skipped lunch. The zulkir pushed a dripping dollop onto his spoon with a crust of bread and raised it to his lips.

"O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir, a thousand apologies for this interruption. I beg your mercy."

Thrul set the spoon down with an ominous sigh. He glowered at his pot-bellied chamberlain. The man had eaten—the zulkir could pluck the menu from his mind; he would have to suffer.

"Why? Why have you come? Why should I forgive the interruption?"

"He is here, O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir. He wishes to speak with you. Now."

The chamberlain's thoughts were less coherent than usual, but a thread of fear ran through all of them, different than the fear Thrul himself inspired. One might almost think Szass Tam had manifested at the citadel's gate, except zulkirs did not visit one another, not without extreme precautions. There had been no alarms, no warnings. Thrul concluded he knew who wished to see him: the spy master.

"Tell her I'm indisposed. Tell her I will remain that way until sundown—unless she'd care to join me in, say, my bedchamber." He couldn't imagine her accepting the offer, though he'd bestir himself if she did.

The chamberlain didn't budge.

"Are you deaf, lead-head? Go and tell her," Thrul commanded, once again raising his spoon.

"O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir, it is not a woman who waits. It is the Chairmaster himself, O Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir."

That was a mild surprise. It was only this morning that Thrul had sent word to his chairkeeper that a Convocation was

likely, and that only because he'd allowed two of Mythrell'aa's minions to escape the city, both of them carrying messages for Szass Tam asking the lich to call a Convocation of zulkirs. Even Szass Tam had to follow procedure for a Convocation. The Chairmaster shouldn't have arrived for another two or three days.

"Find out if he wishes to dine with me—"

"I do not," a man's deep voice came through the door. "Nor do I wish to see your bedchamber."

The chamberlain, who was responsible for Thrul's sacrosanct privacy, turned pasty white beneath his tattoos. His eyes glazed. Spittle appeared at the corners of his quivering mouth. He would have died, if Thrul hadn't decided to deny the Chairmaster the pleasure of watching.

"Welcome," he said. "You should have sent word."

"I am word," the exceptionally tall and slender man said as he entered the balcony.

The Chairmaster wore his own clothes: blood-colored linen gauze, suitable to the season, trimmed with gold threads, garnets, and star rubies—never let it be said that the zulkirs stinted their tithes to the Chairmaster. By his tattoos, the Chairmaster was an illusionist, but he owed nothing to Mythrell'aa, or to anyone else. When he extended his hand, a chair appeared on the balcony: a testament to his power and immunity by working magic in a zulkir's presence without triggering his wards. He sat down opposite Thrul and, having said he wouldn't dine, poured himself wine.

Thrul would have loved to throw the insufferable lout over the balustrade, or, better yet, take him downstairs to the dungeons. He didn't dare. Not even Szass Tam could successfully challenge the Chairmaster, though rumor had it that the lich had tried a century ago. Supposedly the necromancer still bore a wound that wouldn't heal, though the laws of magic stated that the undead couldn't heal—it took magic to repair their torn flesh, magic any adolescent necromancer should have mastered, and Szass Tam was long

past adolescence. Of course, by those same magical laws, Szass Tam couldn't exist either as a lich or as a man, so the rumor never died, and the Chairmaster's reputation as both survivor and wizard was enhanced.

"There's more where that came from," Thrul said of his wine. "I can arrange for a bottle or two to be ready when you depart."

The Chairmaster sipped from the goblet and wrinkled his long nose. "Not necessary, Lord Invocation. It's pleasant enough for a city balcony, but it won't travel well."

Thrul seethed. He knew his vintages. The wine was exceptional, but no one argued with the Chairmaster. "Considering how much you travel, it's a wonder you can find any wine at all," he said, all polite sympathy.

"All life has its hardships," the Chairmaster agreed, taking up the goblet again. "Yours as well as mine. Lord Necromancy has called for a Convocation. There's a complaint against you, Lord Invocation. It is said that you trespass against Illusion, that you've set wards and guards around her tower—the truth of which I ascertained on my way here. These are serious charges, Lord Invocation, with serious penalties, as you must know. You must answer to your peers at a time, within the next month, and at a place, within Thay, of your choosing."

"Bezantur, for the place," Thrul said quickly. Though the Master's visit was early, his contingencies were in place, along with his wards and his guards. "Tomorrow at sundown, for the time."

"The charges are most serious," the Master said after a lengthy pause. "Surely you wish to reconsider? Perhaps to withdraw your provocations entirely? This could be settled without a Convocation, I think. Lady Illusion wishes only to have her freedoms restored."

"Lady Illusion can stand on the top of her tower and howl at the moon, for all I care. I want a Convocation. The place is Bezantur. The time is tomorrow at sunset."

Thrul had the once-in-any-lifetime satisfaction of seeing the Chairmaster at a loss for words.

"It will be difficult," he managed after a moment.

"Well, that's not my problem, is it? Bezantur is within Thay, isn't it? This room, if I chose it, is within Thay. Tomorrow is within a month? Today would be acceptable as well. Surely this is not a surprise. I have notified my chairkeeper yesterday; he will be here in time. I warned my allies that they should do likewise."

By allies Thrul meant Nevron of Conjunction and Lauzoril. Nevron had already acknowledged the message; his chair and its keeper were already moving toward the city. Lauzoril, typically, hadn't; Lord Enchantment never acknowledged messages. You sent a message to one of his chancellors and then you waited—like a common petitioner—for his answer. If Thrul's warning hadn't reached Lauzoril... If the Chairmaster couldn't find him, then whatever else tomorrow's Convocation accomplished, it might rid Invocation of a pesky ally.

"Surely Lord Necromancy did likewise before he notified you, that, too, is within the rules. Unless Lord Necromancy has no allies left? That would place quite a burden on you, wouldn't it? If you had to find everyone yourself?"

Thrul's question made the Chairmaster squirm. Not the reaction he'd expected. Convocation was, after all, a long-honored compromise among zulkirs who needed, on occasion, to actually govern the realm they dominated and resolve their private disputes without inciting a civil war. Each zulkir, without exception, would have preferred to do away with compromise, but since Thay's independence from Mulhorand, no zulkir had come close to subjugating all his peers.

None had come closer than Szass Tam had been a year ago, before some major conspiracy had collapsed and driven him into hiding. But the lich would rise again and again, until he was destroyed, which was why a zulkir like Aznar Thrul

needed not only allies among his peers, but a tharchionate as well. History showed—Thrul was an avid student of history—that the man who succeeded an ambitious failure, such as Szass Tam must inevitably become, would reap the rewards his predecessor had been denied: a unified Thay and seven puppet zulkirs.

Every Red Wizard, especially a zulkir, should have a guiding dream. Until his was reality, however, Invocation relied on tradition, on Convocation and, however reluctantly, on the Chairmaster. The thought that Szass Tam might have subverted the Chairmaster before he'd found the way to do so himself was a bone in Thrul's throat.

The current Chairmaster had been an illusionist before his elevation, years before Thrul or Mythrell'aa had begun to claw to the top of their respective specialties. Thrul's own grandfather, Nymor, Lord Illusion in that time, had branded him. Aznar Thrul had counted on the Chairmaster's memory playing in his favor when the right time came, but had Mythrell'aa beaten him?

"You'd be a fool," Thrul said very quietly, very calmly. "The last Chairmaster who betrayed his office still bathes in fire beneath Thaymount. You might find yourself joining him or, worse, sitting in one of Larloch's chairs yourself."

To his credit, the Chairmaster never flinched. He sipped his wine as if he'd heard nothing. Either the man was innocent of deception—a rarity among Red Wizards—or he was a master of it.

Larloch, reputedly a sorcerer-king of ancient Netheril, had flourished and vanished millennia ago, leaving a legacy of artifacts that tempted many a young wizard to his or her doom. The legend of his eight chairs, magical voids from which no spell could be cast, into which no harm could come, had proved real enough. Seated in his or her chair, attuned not only to the appropriate wizardly discipline but to purely individual differences, a zulkir was both powerless and invulnerable.

Naturally, every zulkir from Buvaar on contrived to maximize the powerlessness of the others while maintaining, or increasing, his own invulnerability. At Thrul's ideal Convocation, seven other zulkirs would sit rigid and helpless in their chairs, their lives and their disciples' lives held permanently hostage to his whim. Real Convocations, however, demanded compromise.

Hence, the chairkeepers, eight wizards whose sole task was guarding the particular chair placed in their possession, and the Chairmaster, who alone could order the chairs assembled for a Convocation. The Chairmaster also guaranteed the safe passage of the zulkirs as they came to sit and, later, depart.

The Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir maintained the best of all possible relationships with his own chairkeeper, a diviner by training.

"Have you accepted my terms?" Thrul asked, thinking of his supper going to waste in front of him. The Chairmaster was known to practice the diplomacy of unlimited patience.

"They are faultless, Lord Invocation, as you knew. The 'keepers will select a suitable chamber—"

"I'd prefer an open location. The slave market will suffice. I'll declare a holiday; the market will be closed."

The Chairmaster nodded. "Weather permitting; I cannot control the weather in a priest-ridden city like this one. If you would choose another place . . . ?"

"I've chosen. I have my own charges to bring. It is not I who trespass against Illusion, but Illusion that trespasses against me, and in trespassing against me, trespasses against my city, which is a trespass against Thay, which is a trespass against all Red Wizards. I have proof."

"Most irregular, Lord Invocation. If you have proof, you should have called the Convocation yourself. Illusion will not be prepared."

"Exactly."

The Chairmaster stood; his chair vanished. "I will tell the

others what has been said here," he warned.

"I'm counting on it."

The Chairmaster seemed about to speak: his chin lifted, his brow furrowed, but he said nothing and with a flash of golden light followed his chair into thin air. Thrul finished his eggs. They were warm now but they hadn't lost their flavor. Ignoring the pickled rice, he turned his attention to his main course: peppered gnolls' tongues in aspic. No wonder the slaves had been so anxious. He poured a black sauce over the quivering mound and savored the fragrant steam it produced.

"O Mighty Tharchion—"

"Go away."

"Mightier Zulkir. It is that woman again. The one with the carnelian; the one without a name."

Thrul stared at the dissolving mound on his plate. If he didn't eat it quickly, it wouldn't be worth eating at all. With an angry sigh, he pushed away from the table.

"Dispose of it," he told the chamberlain, "and I will see the woman in my bedchamber. Clothed or unclothed, however she wishes."

She wished for clothing, but was quite willing to remove her garments—another little disappointment in an altogether frustrating day. She was, however, a challenging partner, which Thrul would never have expected. It raised a host of questions and possibilities, best left until after tomorrow's Convocation.

"The Chairmaster has been here," he said afterward, when they were both dressed.

"I saw him depart."

An overstatement. The Chairmaster wouldn't have reappeared within Bezantur's walls. He let the comment slide, for now. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Even now our spies in the southern cities have moved into the Aglarondan forest. Communication with them will be difficult—impossible—but they are our finest. They

understand what must be done, even if we cannot tell them what to do."

He thought he saw a glimmer of falsehood in her eyes as she spoke of serving his interests and probed her mind subtly. Her thoughts betrayed no secrets, no anxiety, until she sensed his spellcast probe.

"Ask any question, my lord. I have no secrets."

"Have you learned anything closer to home?"

"My net is not cast close to home," she replied, guileless words and thoughts clear as mountain water. "Yet I think your noose around Illusion is not yet tight."

Thrul thought of the minions he'd let out this morning, and thought he'd caught the woman at last. "How would you know that?" he asked.

"The House of Illusion in Tilbrand has sent some of its own out into the world. They follow an interesting path, a northeast path, my lord, to the Aglarondan forest."

First, the Chairmaster arrived early, now this. Mythrell'aa, then, had other means to work her will outside her tower, and had been using them. "What does this mean, woman?"

"That we are not the only ones looking for something in the Yuirwood. That we will not be alone when we find it."

17

Everlund, near the High Forest

After sundown, the eighteenth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

When folk gathered for discussion, the Simbul was most often to be found—or not found—eavesdropping from the chandelier, disguised as a candle. She defended her deceit, saying that her presence inhibited those voices she most needed to hear, but the truth was that Alassra Shentrantra didn't like formal gatherings, and a gathering arranged by Alustriel with three elven sages was as formal as a gathering could get. She would have stayed home, if she hadn't been certain that Alustriel would show up, concerned about her well-being, and demand that she hie herself up to Everlund.

Bowing to the inevitable, Alassra had delved the depths of her wardrobe before conjuring a gray gown scarcely different than the one she usually wore—except it wasn't torn, frayed, or stained. The setting sun was still a handspan above the horizon when she cast the spell that whisked her north to Silverymoon. Alustriel was waiting, serenely beautiful in sapphire and silver.

"Did you forget your jewelry?"

Alassra displayed her rings, each charged with spells. "I don't wear fancy stones."

"They don't have to be fancy, 'Las, but the Tel'Quessir are a formal people. You have to finish things with them. Finishing tells them who you are."

"There isn't an elf alive who doesn't know who I am, what I am. If it bothers them, they shouldn't have agreed to meet with me." A stray thought crossed her mind. "You did tell them they'd be meeting with me didn't you? You didn't tell them I'd changed?"

"They wouldn't have believed me, if I had."

Satisfied, Alassra linked hands with Alustriel and followed her magically from Silverymoon to an ancient grove where an oblong menhir rested atop a number of smaller stones.

It was not the sort of place where Alassra could ever feel comfortable. She had nothing against the elves. After six hundred odd years of living, she had great respect for anyone older than her. But the older she got, the more she appreciated the differences between the two races. The Elven Retreat made perfect sense to her: she wished them well and far away. In her grand plan for Faerun's future, the elves would have the eastern march of Thay, beyond Lake Thaylambar. That thoroughly despoiled land was far enough away, or would be, when she was done with the Red Wizards, and Aglarond, too.

Alassra's discomfort was compounded by the realization that the sages were waiting for them.

"I thought you said sundown," she whispered angrily.

"I did. That's what was agreed. These are not the Tel'Quessir I spoke to; I don't know them. But they've come. I'm sure there are reasons for everything, 'Las. Please don't be difficult."

Hearing voices, the sages roused from their meditations. They did not, as Alassra feared, establish themselves on the wise side of the stone, talking down to short-lived, shortsighted humans. The youngest of the elves, not apparently a sage but a servant, spread a quilt of moonlight-pale silken patchwork over the grass then finished it with a circle of six plump cushions. Taking her cues from Alustriel, Alassra shed her sandals before stepping on the quilt and sitting on one of the cushions. The servant handed her a silver beaker of ice-cold nectar and offered a piece of honey-glazed shortbread—her favorite dessert and almost certainly a peace-offering.

Alassra glanced at her sister, who smiled and said nothing. The elven servant served the sages, then seated himself on the last cushion. "It would help," he began without formality, "if you explained the things that trouble you in your own words. Begin at the beginning and leave nothing out. There may be something of significance that we would otherwise overlook."

Alassra's temper flared. She wasn't a child with a faulty memory; she was ...

She was a queen who'd grown accustomed to the prerogatives and privileges of royalty when she should have known better.

"It began with a vision while I was napping. A voice said Zandilar. The vision showed me a black-maned horse the color of winter twilight..."

The elves scarcely moved while the Simbul told the story, as much of it as she could honestly remember on a moment's notice, leaving out only the bits about how her mirror peered into Thay. Fortified with a second beaker of nectar, Alassra spoke of Lailomun Zerad for the first time since she had

accepted her Chosen heritage. It was a tale no one had ever heard, not the elves, not her sister, not even her own ears. There were tears in Alustriel's eyes when she finished. The elves saw the matter differently.

One of the sages, a black-haired Moon elf with a fondness for knives, six of which could be seen sprouting from his sleeves, boots, and belt, leaned forward to ask: "This personal enmity between you and the Zulkir of Illusion, how does it bear on the question of Zandilar?"

Again the storm queen felt her hackles rise, again she quelled them. "I don't know if it bears on Zandilar. What I do know is that Mythrell'aa has learned of my interest in the horse and, because of Lailomun Zerad, will presume my interest in the Cha'Tel'Quessir, Ebroid of MightyTree. She will pursue them because they are important to me. The other zulkirs will pursue Mythrell'aa, because they are Red Wizards and they swarm whenever one of them has something the others don't. If it were a matter of simply protecting a boy and a horse, I would do that, and I wouldn't be here asking your advice. But it's the Yuirwood, too, and the Cha'Tel'Quessir, and Zandilar, about whom I can learn very little, except that she was called 'the Dancer' and that there's a small stone bearing her name in the Sunglade inside a circle of larger, Seldarine stones."

Alassra leaned forward until her eyes were level with the Moon elf's. "My suspicions are as sharp as your knives, Honored One. I suspect there's a good reason for that outer circle and I suspect the Tel'Quessir would rather no one but them knew what that reason was."

The Moon elf held her glowering stare a moment before straightening his back. He and the other elves looked as if they'd just swallowed something sour. The third sage, a Gold elf of uncommonly fierce demeanor drummed his long fingers together, weighing his words before saying:

"The Red Wizards are their own reward, their own curse. Their quarrels fall hard on their neighbors, but they,

themselves, are vermin. What they represent cannot be eliminated from humanity, but it must be confined, kept out of important places."

"Like the Yuirwood's Sunglade?" Alassra demanded around her sister who sat silently between her and the Gold elf.

"It would be unwise if they gained a foothold there," the Gold elf said.

Alassra gave him a moment's grace to elaborate. He obliged.

"The Tel'Quessir were not the first in the forest. There were others there when they came. Men and women like you—"

"No," the last sage said. She was an elven woman so old there was no color left in her skin or her hair. Opal cataracts clouded her eyes. Her arms, protruding from the white sleeves of her gown, were shrunk twigs that seemed too fragile to lift her hands. Yet she sipped nectar before continuing. "When the Yuir came to Abeir-toril they found men and women like no others. The forest had hidden them, like creatures caught on a island. They lived and worshiped alone, until the Tel'Quessir arrived."

The elven men, the Moon elf sage, the Gold elf, and the younger servant, averted their eyes when the old woman spoke. They did not agree with her, Alassra thought, but they weren't about to disagree in front of humans. The Simbul seized her chance to exploit elven reticence.

"After they arrived, did the Tel'Quessir conquer the Yuir folk and their gods?"

The Gold elf answered quickly, "The Tel'Quessir do not commit conquest."

"Not by intent," the Moon elf corrected. Alassra studied him from the corner of her eye. She'd judged him the least sympathetic, but perhaps she'd judged wrong. More likely Zandilar and the Yuirwood had been a sore point with Faerun's elves for a very long time. The latter notion seemed true when the Gold elf threw his attention at the Moon elf, not her.

"Relkath, Magnar, Zandilar! They were wild gods," he hissed

across the circle. "Those who worshiped them were wild, too, or became wild. If they had tamed themselves ... But that went against their nature. Another path had to be secured before the Tel'Quessir lost their way in the Yuirwood."

The sages lapsed into a discussion in archaic elvish, full of names and events that meant nothing to Alassra. The words meant something to Alustriel. Though the High Lady of Silverymoon listened as still and silent as Alassra, barely perceptible changes in her expression betrayed her interest and surprise as the sages debated what had happened long ago.

The Moon elf blamed the forest, saying it was too old, too wild for the Tel'Quessir. "We were wrong to go there, more wrong to stay. The Yuirwood shaped the Yuir, not the other way around. We should have left it to those who were there when we came."

"Aye," the Gold elf retorted, with all the subtle scorn elves could cram into a single, small word. "Aye, and if we left it... if the coronals had shirked their duty or our gods had shirked theirs, then what, Stiwelen? Would you rather others had come to take our place? They were a lesser folk with lesser gods. They were bound to be overtaken."

Stiwelen, the Moon elf, scowled. He fondled the gem-stone pommels of his knives and said nothing.

Undaunted by the silence among the elves, Alassra entered the discussion. "There was an elven Time of Troubles?" she suggested, referring to the turbulent years, recently passed, when the gods of humanity had warred among themselves in mortal time and mortal form. The elves said nothing; Alassra took that for agreement. "And the Sunblade circles commemorate the Seldarine taming the old, wild powers of the Yuirwood?"

The old woman raised her head. "It was done," she said and stared at the Simbul.

"The Tel'Quessir Seldarine enlightened the old ones and adopted them, as parents to children," the Gold elf added.

"As cousins at a wedding," Stiwelen corrected, a needling smile on his lean face. Alassra was starting to warm to him, though perhaps it was his knives. "There was enlightenment—if you choose to call it that—in all directions."

The Gold elf made a fist and opened his mouth, but the old woman spoke faster. "It was done," she repeated her earlier statement. "The old ones accepted the Tel'Quessir. The Seldarine accepted the old ones. The Yuirwood accepted the elves; they accepted the Yuirwood. It was all done."

"But it didn't last. Humans came to the land they named Aglarond, and the Yuir elves began their own Retreat."

"Not a Retreat," Stiwelen said bitterly. "The Yuir elves couldn't Retreat. They'd bound themselves to the forest. They doomed themselves."

Alassra hid her surprise. She'd always assumed—the Cha'Tel'Quessir themselves assumed—that the Yuir elves had Retreated from the forest to Evermeet. "Doomed? They aren't.. . ? They all died?"

Stiwelen nodded; Alassra looked to the Gold elf for a contradiction and got it.

"They are part of the Yuirwood. They had accepted the forest; it had accepted them. There was no other way. They understood that. When the humans came into the Yuirwood, they accepted them, too, and the Cha'Tel'Quessir were born."

"And the Cha'Tel'Quessir are doomed as well!" Stiwelen shouted, an unseemly sound that echoed around the menhir. He rose to his feet and stalked the perimeter of the glade. "This is what comes of leaving things half-done. Are we going to let our mistakes flourish or are we going to put a stop to them?"

The Gold elf rose to his feet as well. "There have been no mistakes!"

Stiwelen laughed, a biting sound, like quarrels from a crossbow. It flushed the birds from their roosts in nearby trees. A nighthawk stooped; there was scream, then silence

as it took its prey. Alustriel laid her left hand on Alassra's arm. A spell tingled in her fingertips.

Nethreene, we should leave now.

Alassra shook off the hand and the spell. Dlaertha, she used her sister's secret name, as Alustriel had used hers. Go, if you wish, but the conversation's just starting to get interesting. I think I'll stay a while longer.

Alustriel scowled and stayed.

"They are both right," the old woman whispered, as if the men couldn't hear her. "The Yuir were what we call Sy-Tel'Quessir, what you call wild elves. They held themselves apart from the coronals and the Court. They turned their backs on elegant cities, elegant philosophies. When the forest was threatened by humans, drow and their allies, the Yuir Sy-Tel'Quessir fought alone: They refused all offers of assistance."

"Offers!" Stiwelen sputtered, proving he heard and listened.

"You do not offer a drowning man a rope. You dive into the water and drag him to the shore."

It was the Gold elf's turn to shatter the night's quiet with his laughter. "And you know nothing about either drowning men or the Yuir Sy-Tel'Quessir. The choice was theirs: They made it; we honored it. The trolls, the drow, and the rest of the Underdark were repulsed. They had their victory, on their terms."

"What of the humans? The Cha'Tel'Quessir say the humans fought beside the Yuir in the dark days, not against them," Alassra asked.

"The Cha'Tel'Quessir," Stiwelen spat the syllables out as curses. "Suppose we fall in love, you and I." He glared at Alassra who considered it unlikely. "We exchange vows. We live together. We have children. If I love a Gold elf or a Sea elf or even a drow, my children will be like me or their mother, but with you, our children would be neither wholly like you, nor wholly like me. A mistake? Perhaps. An exception? Certainly. The foundation of a new race? Half elf,

half human forever? The Cha'Tel'Quessir? Gods help us all! They have accepted a burden they cannot hope to carry. They are children playing with fire, and they must be stopped."

"This, from the man who'd leap blindly into water to rescue the drowning. What do you do when a man is trapped in a burning house? Walk away?"

"I'd make damn sure he couldn't fall in the water or set fire to his house again! What would you do, Islywyn?"

Alassra thought there might be other options, chief among them: talking to the Cha'Tel'Quessir elders who freely admitted—to her, at least—that they knew less than they would have liked about their Yuir ancestors. She'd take care of that when she got back to Aglarond when she shared her account of this evening. But before that—lest the reason for this gathering be forgotten:

"Excuse me, I came here to learn about Zandilar, the Dancer."

"The fool," Stiwelen replied as Islywyn said:

"The traitor."

"One, the other, or both?" Alassra asked, provoking the two men in the hope of getting them to speak freely, and rashly. But it was the old woman who answered her. "A maiden, not of the Sy-Tel'Quessir. She fell in love with the forest and it gave her one of the old names and accepted her as part of itself. Neither wizard, nor warrior, she was merely beautiful, and when the Yuirwood was attacked, she defended it with her beauty and rode to battle on a gray horse."

Islywyn strode onto the quilt. He stood in front of the old woman, towering over her. "Zandilar rode straight to the drow temples. She defended the Yuirwood by consorting with the dark god, Vhaeraun!"

The old woman rose to her feet, agile and steady despite her frail appearance. "She hoped to seduce him and take his secrets back to the Yuirwood. She was betrayed."

"The traitor herself betrayed!" Islywyn countered. "The fate

of all those who treat with the drow: the seducer becomes the seduced."

"Never! She suffered, as only gods can suffer, but her true faith was never broken, even at the end."

"Here's your fool, Stiwelen," Islywyn said, staring at the old woman. "Zandilar the Martyr."

The old woman closed her eyes.

It was stand or be left out of the conversation, so Alassra stood. "What happened to Zandilar? Her name remains on a Sunblade stone. Others have weathered, but hers remains."

"That's a question to which no one has an answer," Stiwelen said softly. He leaned against the menhir, knife in hand, examining its edge. "Zandilar, as my lady says, suffered as only gods can suffer: she was subsumed, vanquished, we think, along with all the gods and demigods the Yuir venerated. They all disappeared, extinguished like so many candles. The Tel'Quessir cannot find them. The Seldarine cannot find them. As for the Yuir, they were extinguished not long after they defeated the drow and drove them back; and the trolls and their other enemies—except for the humans.

"Humans cut down the ancient trees; the Yuir fought among themselves. Humans carved farms where there had been forest; the Yuir sickened and dwindled. Humans set up camps in the heart of the forest and within a generation—a human generation—the Cha'Tel'Quessir had claimed the Yuirwood." Stiwelen sheathed his knife. "Tell me, Queen of Aglarond, do you think there was love in the air when the first Cha'Tel'Quessir were born?"

"Yes." Alassra replied.

"Then, tell me the name of your mother's mother."

The Queen of Aglarond stood mute, unable to answer, uncertain which of her mother's parents had been an elf, which had been human.

"Bethril," Alustriel answered in her sister's place, "Bethril Morningsong, daughter of Herran and Caethene. She was a Moon elf, like yourself and through Herran Morningsong she

traced her lineage to Querryll and Thalleir, Elayna and—" Alassra stopped her sister with a sad shake of her head. "Thank you, I should have asked long ago, but Stiwelen's point is well-taken. The Cha'Tel'Quessir know they are descended from the Yuir elves, but they know nothing about them, presumably because those ancestors shared nothing with their Cha'Tel'Quessir children. The Yuir and their gods were forgotten or—worse—half remembered. And the problem with anything half-done or half-remembered is that it's never the right half. Is it, Stiwelen?"

"Never," the Moon elf agreed. "The Yuir erected the outer circle, but they didn't tell their children why. Now those children are whispering forbidden names, and their whispers are being heard."

"You can't be serious," Islywyn snarled. "It's been five hundred years since the last Yuir died."

Alassra couldn't tell if the Gold elf meant too much time had passed, or not enough. Elves understood time and tradition in a fundamentally different way than humans could. Mystra's Chosen—Elminster, herself and her sisters, and a handful of others—might live as long as elves, but they were too few in number to ever think like them. She judged Stiwelen younger than Islywyn and both of them far younger than the old woman, but she couldn't guess if five hundred years was a large part of Stiwelen's life or a small one.

"Our friend here," Stiwelen extended his hand toward Alassra, "did not hear Hanali's name in her dreams. She heard Zandilar. The Yuirwood Sy-Tel'Quessir failed, Islywyn. They couldn't keep their promises to the Seldarine, and they couldn't keep their promises to the Yuirwood, either. Can you imagine that these Cha'Tel'Quessir will fare better? They don't even know what those promises were! We don't know! How many more mistakes must be made before they are corrected? You listened to our friend: Zandilar's name came to her in a dream. Zandilar's stone is legible again. Zandilar's coming back, Islywyn. They'll all come back."

"Zandilar," Islywyn mused. "Zandilar the Traitor, corrupted by Vhaeraun."

"Not a traitor," the old woman insisted. "Never a traitor! She escaped from Vhaeraun's pit and returned to the Yuirwood. Her faith was never challenged."

"It should have been," Stiwelen shouted. "It should have been by the Tel'Quessir! We should have acted when we could."

"They did," the old woman said in a whisper that commanded attention. "I was there. The drow and their allies were gone; the humans were coming. The Yuirwood could never be restored to what it had been; there was only the question of protecting what was left. The Yuir elves and their gods agreed: they gave up their essence to the forest, to keep its secrets. They agreed to be forgotten."

"But they weren't," Alassra said, matching the old woman's tone. "The Cha'Tel'Quessir were born. They remember . . . They want to remember."

The old woman smiled. "There was love when the first Cha'Tel'Quessir were born. Zandilar saw to that."

Satisfaction illuminated her pale, fragile skin. "There must always be passion and hope."

"Zandilar, the Traitor," Stiwelen hissed, his hands going for his knives.

Alassra surged, intending to place herself between the Moon elf and the woman. Alustriel latched on to her sleeve.

Nethreene! No! We have stayed too long. We must go—quickly.

Spellcraft tingled on Alassra's elbow. She could have shaken it off. She could have blasted Stiwelen: instincts honed through six centuries of danger told Alassra that she had the advantage over the sages—though not, perhaps, over the servant who, scarcely noticed, prepared a spell of his own. Elves at war with elves: it was the darker part of their legends, even in the Yuirwood.

Nethreene!

And nothing a human should witness.

Alassra shook off her sister's hand and spell. She wouldn't be dragged like a wayward child. A moment later they faced each other in Silverymoon.

"Well, that was interesting." Alassra got the first words between them.

Alustriel was too shaken to respond. Her eyes were glazed with tears; she made her way blindly to a chair where she sat with her fingers in a knot. "We have turned over stones best left unturned," she murmured. "The sages always speak with one voice."

"Either you're mistaken, or we weren't listening to elven sages. We didn't start turning over stones, Sister, they rolled over in front of us. The Yuirwood's getting its most ancient gods back, and I don't know what that means because the Tel'Quessir either don't know themselves or won't trust a human with the truth."

After a moment's reflection, Alustriel nodded slowly. "They wanted to know what you already knew. They came to listen, not to advise."

"They were supposed to come with answers."

"They will confer, resolve their differences—"

"Concoct a tale suitable for our ears? They're afraid, Sister dear. They've been afraid of the Yuirwood since they came to Abeir-toril, and they've never been more afraid than they are now."

"With good reason."

"That remains to be seen." Alassra summoned the wherewithal to return to Velprintalar.

"Be careful, 'Las. Don't do anything rash, I beg you. I'll return to Evermeet; I'll talk to them and get to the bottom of this."

"Do as you wish, and don't worry about me: I don't start things; I finish them."

Alassra raised her hand and was gone, back to Velprintalar and her privy chambers where she shed her gown, her silver

hair and every other habitual part of her appearance. The Simbul became Cha'Tel'Quessir, with brown hair and burnished skin. She pulled on soft leathers in wine and sable. She retrieved weapons—a spear and a sword—from a chest beneath her bed. When her transformation was finished, not even her sisters or Elminster would have guessed she was not what she appeared to be: a Cha'Tel'Quessir sell-sword without a whit of magic to her name.

18

The city of Bezantur, in Thay
Approaching sunset, the nineteenth day of Highsun, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Lauzoril paced his locked bolt-hole deep within enchantment's Bezantur academy. His crimson robes of office, shimmering with enchantments and embroidered in gold, swirled around him. Dust vanished in the spell-induced breeze that kept the bolt-hole air cool and fresh. Waiting never came easily for him. Waiting for the Chairmaster to open a Convocation came hardest of all.

He disliked the posturing and pretense that accompanied the zulkirs' gatherings: the suffocating robes, the web of deceptive and defensive spells each threw up. The defensive spells were negated the moment they sat down, and as for deception, he was immune to most and could, with a little effort, see through the rest.

So could the other zulkirs.

They could see Szass Tam for the corpse he was, and they could see him as a slave's son. Once, when Lauzoril was a novice toiling in Eltabbar, he'd shaved his body and decorated it, but he came from hairy stock. The effort always exceeded the effect, and there was nothing he could do about his ruddy complexion or his bright green eyes without compromising his vision. Long before Lauzoril became zulkir, the tattoos were gone, save the oldest one, and he'd let his hair grow out.

He was a slave's son; he wasn't proud of it, but he'd stopped being ashamed. There was silver in his golden hair now and natural lines were starting to create their own decorations on his suntanned skin, but at a Convocation, only Szass Tam presented a stranger face.

Lauzoril paused to wonder what face Lord Necromancy would present.

This Convocation was Aznar Thrul's idea, even if Szass Tam's seal had been on the writ Lauzoril had received from the Chairmaster only a few short hours ago. Lord Invocation, in his secondary office as Tharchion of the Priador, was leaning on Lady Illusion.

Only a fool would have believed Mythrell'aa's return to neutrality a few months back. Even if her declaration had been sincere, Lauzoril knew better than most that once an ally of Necromancy, always an ally of Necromancy. Mythrell'aa had stood with Szass Tam at the last Convocation. If she hadn't—if she'd clung to her neutrality—Necromancy wouldn't have had the weight to mortify Enchantment, Thrul, and Nevron of Conjunction for their parts in last year's futile attack at on the Rashemaar barbarians at Gauros Gorge.

She was entitled to collect a debt. No matter that Szass Tam had endured worse humiliation late last winter beneath the stones of Thaymount. Szass Tam, never a fool, honored his debt, sealed the Chairmaster's writ, and was compelled to appear, the same as any other zulkir.

That much, Lauzoril knew for himself. The rest, the whys behind Aznar Thrul's strong-arm diplomacy and his expectations at day's end, he'd learned from Thrul's vengeance-minded spy master. The zulkir had been speaking with her in this room when a minion from the Black Citadel arrived. For a moment it had seemed that Lauzoril's worst fears about doing business with traitors had been realized, but the minion had merely carried a message warning Lauzoril to prepare for a quick Convocation in

Bezantur.

Lauzoril hadn't begun asking the spy master questions when she told him everything he'd wanted to know. And a bit more. She was adamant that running Lady Illusion out of Bezantur was only the beginning. Thrul had plans for Aglarond, plans for Conjuraton, and plans for Enchantment, all of which involved replacing people he didn't like with people he could control.

He despises you, the spy master had said. He thinks you rely on luck and charisma. You were supposed to die last year in the Gorge of Gauros—a battle accident, a Rashemaar arrow from a Bezantur bow. He will never forgive you for surviving. After Szass Tam, you're next. He's picked your successor, when we have negotiated, I will share it with you.

After Szass Tam.

For Lauzoril's father and grandfather, after Szass Tam meant the day the sun rose in the west, but the Zulkir of Necromancy had stumbled badly. Since spring, his undead legions had fallen apart—literally—when he failed to maintain the spells that animated them. Blackhearts, turncoats, and renegades who'd relied on Necromancy to sustain their treacheries found themselves exposed to bitter, unforgiving winds. Summer had brought public executions, private assassinations, and cracks in the lich's armor.

Lauzoril had exploited a few of those cracks himself; Enchantment was stronger than it had been. So were all the other schools. The zulkirs had spent a season realigning themselves, carefully and subtly, because no one had known the extent or nature of Szass Tam's wounds or when he might decide to reassert himself.

If Lauzoril hadn't had the message from Thrul and additional information from Thrul's spy master, he might have thought today's Convocation marked the start of Tam's return. The zulkirs were growing bolder—less careful, less subtle, less afraid of Necromancy. It wouldn't be wise to belittle Szass Tam. He was, undeniably, the mightiest zulkir in Thay's

history, but he had to reassert himself soon, or sheer power wouldn't be enough.

Lauzoril might have been worried. Instead he was excited. After today, the words "after Szass Tam" might not be a motto for the undead. After today, Lauzoril might be at hazard with his allies, might be allied with his enemies. Illusion and Enchantment had made common cause before, though not in his tenure. Anything was possible, even in Aglarond where his dagger moved through the impenetrable Yuirwood forest.

It all depended on the face Szass Tam showed at the Convocation, whether the lich was equal to Invocation, Conjuraton, and Enchantment combined—for the next few hours they would remain allies—or whether tomorrow might not be the first day after Szass Tam.

A chime sounded and a column of brilliant sunlight sprang up from the carpet.

"Zulkir Lauzoril, Lord Enchantment," the Chairmaster's voice boomed out of the column. "Your name is called. Step into the light."

He squared his shoulders and crow-hopped on his toes once or twice, conquering the moment of fear that invariably accompanied the Chairmaster's summons. The safe-passage rules of Convocation hadn't been broken in the centuries since the Chairmaster's office was created, but in Thay, there was always a first time, a first victim.

The Zulkir of Enchantment took a deep breath and walked into the light.

* * * * *

Enchantment had no shame, Aznar Thrul thought to himself as Lauzoril strode out of the summoning light, onto the damp sand of the slave market. Never mind that the man's ancestors—probably his parents—had stood on similar sand in different circumstances, Lauzoril marched about with that long hair, those green eyes, that naked tan. He could have transformed himself, brought himself closer to the Mulan

ideal; everyone else did. Zulkirs would see through it, of course, but the man should have made the attempt.

Thrul returned Lauzoril's greeting. They smiled at each other across the empty sand. The eight chairs were arranged in a circle by lot and the Chairmaster's whim. The chairs on either side of Thrul contained Nevron of Conjunction and—Talona's painful mercy—Lallara Mediocros, Zulkir of Abjuration . . . Zulkir of Indulgence and Mindless Chatter would be more apt. Lauzoril sat between Mythrell'aa herself, a viper swathed in crimson, and Druxus Rhym, a man clearly in need of a good night's sleep.

Rumor claimed that Enchantment was responsible for Rhym's haggard demeanor, that Lauzoril had snared one or more of Rhym's close associates in conspiracies. No one knew quite how many were involved, certainly not Druxus Rhym. Thrul wasn't shedding any tears for Lord Alteration; he'd lost as many to Rhym's poison as had Lauzoril and Nevron. He could wish, though, that his own revenge plots had worked quicker or been more successful, or that Nevron had been the one to spoil Rhym's sleep. The way things stood, Thrul would have to thank his ally, congratulate him for a job well done.

Thrul exchanged a pained glance with Nevron. Lauzoril hadn't sat down; Lauzoril was talking to Druxus Rhym, saying the gods alone knew what, except Rhym was listening, nodding his head, and smiling weakly.

And Nevron . . . Lord Conjunction looked worse than Druxus Rhym. He hadn't been himself since Gauros. He'd lost an old apprentice in the battle there—his ladylove—and his nerve. Szass Tam's catastrophe hadn't restored Nevron's sharpness, and every move that Lauzoril made put another nail in his heart. Conjunction's days were numbered. Thay had no use for a broken zulkir.

The seventh name was called: Yaphyll, Lady Divination. Two years ago, she'd been Thrul's third ally. Then Lallara had seduced her, and she had taken a walk down Necromancy's

path. She was smiling now, at him and Lallara together. It would take more than a smile before Thrul would forgive her. "Zulkir Szass Tam, Lord Necromancy," the Chairmaster called the last name, the name they'd all been waiting to hear. "Your name is called. Step into the light."

A square of sunshine appeared on the sand. Despite himself, Thrul held his breath. A moment passed, and another. He started counting in his head: three, four, five . . .

"Zulkir Szass Tam, Lord Necromancy. Your name is called. Step into the light."

Eight, nine, ten.

Thrul looked up. He caught Mythrell'aa's eye by mistake. They both looked away. Rhym's lips moved as he counted the moments. Nevron's eyes were closed. Lauzoril leaned in the corner of his chair. His eyes were hooded; he looked like a cat about to pounce.

"Zulkir Szass Tam, Lord—"

Tam appeared on the sand, facing his chair, his back to his peers. He wore a red robe so dark it seemed black. It was covered with patterns that shifted and could have lured an unsuspecting mind toward madness, if Larloch's chairs had not negated the effect, or if there'd been an unsuspecting mind anywhere in the circle. The lich seemed a bit slump-shouldered and the scents of death surrounded him.

Aznar Thrul settled back in his chair to get a good view of Szass Tam's face as he turned. Then, belatedly conscious that he'd assumed Enchantment's stance, he leaned forward. The undead Zulkir of Necromancy had turned around.

"Love of Loviatar..."

Lallara, naturally, broke the silence, though Thrul needed a strong jaw to keep his own gasping reaction deep down in his throat. A lich was nothing a sane man—a sane zulkir—ever wanted to see, even with Larloch's chair beneath him.

It wasn't death or undeath; those were commonplace in Thay. A lich was something worse, a nightmare from which

you woke up screaming, but couldn't quite remember why. One look at Szass Tam and every living zulkir remembered that nightmare.

It was true, of course, that the zulkirs saw their undead peer as he was at each Convocation, but just as Rhym and Nevron were ragged, so, too, was Szass Tam. His face was chalk white and constantly in motion, rotting and reforming itself. The zulkir's eyes were empty sockets seething with a luminous green vapor, and his neck had become a serpent whose head had replaced the tongue in his gaping mouth.

At the head of an army marching against Aglarond or Rashemen, Szass Tam's lich form would have been an ideal battle standard, but in the Bezantur slave market, it only demonstrated how far Szass Tam had fallen and how far he still had to climb before he was his old self again.

"Lord Necromancy," the Chairmaster intoned from his safe place behind Larloch's chair. "It was you who sealed the writ of Convocation, you who must begin the proceedings."

"Zulkir Aznar Thrul, Lord Invocation—"

Thrul sat erect in his chair. In his wildest dreams he hadn't hoped for this: a whispering Szass Tam, a Szass Tam whose quavering voice truly came from beyond the grave. He tried to catch Mythrell'aa's eye: surely she was having second thoughts.

* * * * *

"Lord Invocation, you have trespassed against another zulkir. You have confined her and denied her the support and consultation of her school. By the Rule of Iphonos Cor, this is forbidden and must be undone. No zulkir can be denied the free access to her school—"

Mythrell'aa contained her shock and anger. All spring, after Tam's humiliation and her own awkward retreat into Serpent Tower, she had secretly funneled support to her overlord: rare and precious reagents for spells whose purposes she did not want to know; living minions to replace the undead servants he'd lost when his schemes to enslave the tanar'ri

lord, Eltab, came crashing down around him; gold and gems in great quantities, no questions asked.

He was Szass Tam. He'd come back stronger than ever from other setbacks, worse setbacks. Mythrell'aa remembered; she was much older than she looked, but she couldn't remember a time when Szass Tam hadn't dominated Thay.

Earlier this summer, she'd asked to meet with him—to see him with her own eyes that were immune to all illusion, enchantment and disguise. They met at an inn near Eltab, unheralded, unnoticed. The lich had seemed himself and properly grateful for the sacrifices she'd made on his behalf. He'd given her a black jewel with the power to kill. Mythrell'aa wore it now, beneath her robes, between her breasts. It was useless against the already dead.

Szass Tam finished speaking. His chest heaved from the effort. Clots of rotten flesh flew into the air, carried by a dank, fetid draft. Mythrell'aa, seated on the lich's left, raised her hand and breathed across the wax perfume she wore on her wrist during Reeking Heat. It didn't help.

The Chairmaster cleared his throat. "Zulkir Aznar Thrul, Lord Invocation, what say you?"

"Ten years ago, I brought an end to the Salamander War and order to the Priador, which replaced Bezantur as the southwestern tharch of Thay. In the absence of others—"

Mythrell'aa seethed. He'd slain her longtime friend and companion, Mari Agneh, then stuffed the Black Citadel with orcs and gnolls before anyone could object!

—"I became tharchion of the Priador and ruled it from Bezantur, but I was already a zulkir, and there was, already, a zulkir living in Bezantur. Naturally, as I could not turn away from my obligations to Invocation—"

No zulkir would. Tharchions had only as much authority as the zulkirs allowed them. Mythrell'aa, herself, had ruled the Tharch of Bezantur through Mari Agneh before the Salamander War.

—"The Zulkir of Illusion should have left, also according to

the Rule of Iphonos Cor that two zulkirs shall not establish permanent residence within the same city walls. Lady Illusion begged to remain in her Bezantur tower—"

Mythrell'aa had not begged. Bezantur had been Illusion's home since the first zulkirs were named. There were other cities in the Priador, if Aznar Thrul insisted on being both zulkir and tharchion.

—"We negotiated—"

Thrul was younger then, virile and the recent victor in a brutal war. She'd invited him to Serpent Tower for a day, then a week. He was amusing, as poor Lailomun could never be. How was she to guess he'd become such a grasping bore?

—"Lady Illusion swore to remain neutral in matters of power and policy—"

Such things had never interested her. They still didn't, but she'd been a fool to think they didn't matter.

—"She broke that oath, Lord Necromancy, when she declared her support for you, last year after Gauros—"

Gauros was a disaster for Thay; and Aznar Thrul, along with his two allies, was responsible for it. The three were censured, disgraced. Common people—slaves!—spoke their names openly and with contempt. Szass Tam had had Thay firmly in the grasp of his long, undead fingers. The choice had seemed obvious: support Necromancy or risk guilt by association with one's neighbor, Invocation. Obvious, at least, at the time, before Szass Tam committed an even greater blunder in the caverns below Thaymount.

—"Later she recanted that support, reasserting her neutrality—"

What else could she do?

—"With lies, but you already know that, Lord Necromancy—she's been doing your work in Aglarond, spying on the witch-queen, making alliances with the Yuirwood mongrels."

Mythrell'aa lowered her perfumed hand to her breast where she clutched Szass Tam's black jewel through her robe. For a

heartbeat, the name on her tongue was her own.

Vazurmu had said she'd been brought down from behind, but by a Red Wizard, an invoker, not an Aglarondan peasant. Vazurmu had known, and Mythrell'aa should have listened. But Mythrell'aa's shortsightedness wasn't the worst part of her current predicament. The worst part was seated beside her, in Necromancy's chair, not across from her in Invocation's.

The Zulkir of Illusion had never told the Zulkir of Necromancy about her activities in Aglarond or the advantage she had over the silver-eyed queen. The advantage she'd once had: the rose-thorn no longer responded to her scrying spells.

When Thrul finished denouncing his neighbor and peer, Szass Tam demanded proof for the charges, though not because he believed in Mythrell'aa's innocence. Quite the contrary, although Thrul—cretin that he was—couldn't see that he'd won. The Mighty Tharchion of the Priador, Mightier Zulkir of Invocation wouldn't give anything to his long-standing enemy. Beshaba's mercy! If he kept it up, he might succeed in convincing Tam that the charges were trumped up.

Even Nevron could see victory slipping through his faction's hands. The weary weasel seemed to be in physical agony the longer Aznar Thrul prevaricated with Szass Tam. Mythrell'aa wouldn't chance a sidelong peek at the man on her left. If Lauzoril weren't zulkir of an unimportant school and lazy as a frostbitten snake, he'd be the man to challenge Szass Tam.

The man ...

Mythrell'aa had assumed it would take a man to break Szass Tam.

The school. . .

She'd assumed it would take a man with a potent school behind him. She'd locked herself up in Serpent Tower waiting for a miracle to happen. But women had dominated

Thay in the past, zulkirs from minor schools, also.

By the time Mythrell'aa stood to endure her humiliation and disgrace, she'd come to see herself in a new and different light. It was time to leave Serpent Tower, time to take Lailomun to Aglarond—and when that was done, it would be time to return.

19

The city of Velprintalar, in Aglarond
Approaching dawn, the twentieth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Leaving Velprintalar had taken the Simbul longer than it should have. She'd wasted an entire day, agonizing over which spells to inscribe in a deer-hide spellbook—which reagents to stuff into an enchanted pouch that was larger within than without but couldn't hold everything on her workroom shelves. She'd sent a message ahead to her chief forester in the Yuirwood, a man whose trust and cooperation was essential if she were going to sort out this many-layered mess.

Now dawn was coming, and she'd bulled her way out of tighter corners with far less than she was carrying to the Yuirwood. The time had come to seal her privy chambers with wards only Mystra's Chosen could disassemble, to peel the quilt off her mirror for a final glimpse at her known enemies.

"East, to Thay. The zulkirs."

Quicksilver swirled itself over the dome. Instead of the myriad stains and splotches, all the darkness congealed in a single area of discontent the Simbul recognized as Bezantur. She stood back from the display, knuckles balanced on leather-garbed hips.

"A Convocation? In Bezantur? Mythrell'aa's city."

Once or twice a year, the zulkirs curbed their rancor and rivalry long enough to govern their realm. The eight wizards were a formidable group on those rare occasions when they made common cause with one another. Any time the Simbul

saw them together, she routinely doubled Aglarond's defenses. This year, in the aftermath of Szass Tam's failure to enslave the tanar'ri lord, Eltab—due, in large part, to adventurers she had recruited and supported—the Simbul firmly believed that Thay had no legions to launch at its neighbors. Her mirror probably reflected a formal realignment among the lesser zulkirs, but she couldn't take a chance with her realm's well-being.

The Cha'Tel'Quessir mercenary became the Simbul again and made an appearance in her audience chamber, the first since her birthday. She summoned her councilors, gave them their orders, and shared only enough truth to keep them convinced the danger was real. It was late morning before she was back in her bolt-hole; noon before she was dressed again in Cha'Tel'Quessir leathers. She'd added a bow and a quiverful of arrows to her kit. Her sword was in its scabbard, an ironwood spear clenched in her hand, when she gave the mirror one last glance.

The Convocation had been a quick one and was already ended. The zulkirs were dispersing. Invocation and Conjunction remained in Bezantur. Lauzoril had vanished the way potent wizards tended to disappear when they were hiding or traveling within their spells; Alteration and Abjuration were missing as well. Szass Tam's oily shadow had returned to Delhumide, and the crimson smear of Illusion was on the move, bold as blood, west of Bezantur.

Headed west to where? Alassra glanced at the shelf above her worktable, at the empty place where the rose-thorn branch had rested in crystal memory. Then the Simbul raised her arms, spoke a word, and vanished.

She reappeared at the base of a great oak tree deep in the Yuirwood. A Cha'Tel'Quessir woman—not the person Alassra expected to see—waited on the moss, lashing arrowheads to willow shafts. The woman leapt straight into the air, scattering her work and breaking an arrow beneath her boots when she landed.

Both women were angry, but Alassra had only herself to blame. Her message to Trovar Halaern had told him to come to the tree where they usually met—but she hadn't told him to come in person or warned him that she was coming to the Yuirwood in disguise. And she was a day late. The Cha'Tel'Quessir was someone Halaern trusted implicitly, which was as good a recommendation as anyone in Aglarond should ever need. She was also rightly frightened and suspicious. She'd shielded herself adroitly with a quick bit of Yuirwood druidry and was reaching for her knife.

"No need, my friend," Alassra said in flawless Cha'Tel'Quessir dialect. "Halaern was expecting me."

The woman shook her head slowly. She wasn't convinced, but there were subtle enchantments that Alassra could work without risking her Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise. They began to erode the stranger's suspicions.

"What is your name? Your tree-family?" she asked, her hand at last moving from her knife.

"Chayan." It was a fairly common name among the Cha'Tel'Quessir. "Of SilverBranch."

"SilverBranch? I don't know that tree."

"It's a long story." Alassra heaved a dramatic sigh. "I was alone when I left the Yuirwood and I've been gone a long time. Too long. I'm back now; back for good. The Simbul said I would find Trovar Halaern of Yuirwood here."

The woman brightened. "My brother was here earlier, but he had to leave. I'm Gren, of his tree. Welcome, Chayan. Let me lead you to our home."

"I'd sooner find your brother. Will you take me to him?"

Gren shook her head. "There's been trouble lately with the seelie cousins. He's gone to find the truth, and told me not to follow. There's no wisdom in crossing him—nor in following after him, if you've forgotten the forest or haven't got a sprig of magic to you."

"I've got a sprig or two," Alassra assured her companion, briefly displaying her talisman necklace. "And I haven't

been gone so long that I can't follow a forester's trail."

Gren laughed. "My brother leaves no trail, but he said if I met a stubborn woman at the tree, I should send her north after him. Are you a stubborn woman, Chayan of SilverBranch?"

"Very."

"Then hike north and tell my brother I'll come looking for him if he's not back by sundown."

They parted friends and Alassra headed north, then east, following a trail Halaern had blazed for no one but his queen to follow. The Simbul knew she'd caught up with him when she heard a bear growling nearby. She knew he was in trouble when she felt malice and magic in the forest air.

Alassra quickly unslung her bow, tightened the bowstring and tested the weapon's pull. Then, in absolute silence, she followed Halaern's trail to its end. At first she thought he had drawn his sword against a bear, but that wouldn't account for the magic she sensed all around her. She saw twisted shadows among the trees. They swooped down to strike her forester with a variety of weapons, including magic spells.

If the seelie were a nuisance, their dark-spirited cousins, the unseelie, were a true menace, with venom on their blades and in their minds. They did their worst against Trovar Halaern, but the forester was deadly with his sword and the Yuirwood itself shielded him from their vicious, but minor, magic. The bear was not so fortunate. Though the dark seelie preferred to torment the sentient races, they'd stoop to animals if the victims were especially tempting: two bear cubs, midway through their first summer. Both had been shapeshifted and wounded; one appeared dead, the other, with a broken wing sprouted from its back, cried piteously.

The bear instinctively defended her cubs, blind to the magical dangers her diminutive enemies presented. Her coat was ragged and blood soaked where they'd assaulted her with fire and acid.

Halaern fought beside the bear, dodging her teeth and claws

as often as he attacked the dark seelie. Watching the skirmish, as yet unnoticed by either side, the Simbul weighed her choices. She had the spells to smite each darting seelie to the ground, killing it directly or stunning it but capturing one of the creatures appealed to her. No one knew where they hid between attacks; it wasn't anywhere that mortal men and women dwelt. Once they'd been rare in the Yuirwood, creatures of legend not experience. That had begun changing several years ago. At first the Simbul had believed the cause was delinquent magic left over from the Time of Troubles but now—with her meeting with the elven sages fresh in her mind—she suspected it had something to do with the Yuirwood's old, wild gods.

A year ago, she'd offered all her foresters rings enchanted with spells meant specifically to counter the unseelie. Halaern had politely declined. He didn't like wizard magic, didn't like any magic unless it was rooted in his beloved Yuirwood. It had taken Alassra years to get him to wear a verdigrised circlet that worked with the forest's innate magic and—because she'd made it—allowed her to sense his well-being whether she was in Velprintalar or six paces to his left. Her forester was tiring, starting to think that he'd have to leave the she-bear and her cubs to an unpleasant fate. He wouldn't appreciate great gouts of spellcraft, but he was ready to welcome a sword swung by a friend's arm.

Alassra shed her bow, drew her sword and, mindful that interrupting an ongoing fight was dangerous all around, crept through the brush until she was in Halaern's direct line of sight. When she was certain he'd see her quickly and clearly, she gave a warbling war cry and whacked a grotesque seelie with the wings of a bat, the lower body of a serpent, and the upper body of an orc just before it loosed a spell.

She meant to kill it, but instead of falling to the ground, it vanished with a hiss of magic.

"Be wary! They cast spells!" Halaern shouted an

unnecessary warning, but then, for all he knew she was just another Cha'Tel'Quessir passing through the Yuirwood.

The dark seelie cast spells in waves, a handful of them darting down from trees to utter obscenities, then vanish, as the bat-serpent-orc had done, only to be replaced a moment later by another group from whatever demiplane they called home. Alassra felt the spells like raindrops: nasty variations of simple magic, just as she'd suspected.

Of course, the unseelie didn't know who she was any more than Halaern did. What they saw was a Cha'Tel'Quessir sell-sword without even a circlet to protect her. When she didn't succumb to their first assault, they tried again, in greater number, with poisoned weapons in addition to their spells. Alassra swung her sword double-handed and struck three of them simultaneously. Two vanished, but the third hit the ground with a thud. She sidestepped and planted her heel on its rib cage.

That was one dark seelie who wouldn't be leaving the Yuirwood.

Alassra ducked another onslaught of poisoned spears, arrows, and spells meant to transform parts of her into a rat. One of the spears narrowly missed her eye, a reminder that even the Simbul could find herself blinded when there were more sharpened objects flying through the air than she could count. She longed to use a spell or two, if only to convince the hovering nuisances that they shouldn't use theirs, but if any Red Wizards made it as far as the Yuirwood, the dark seelie would be their natural allies, and she didn't want to take the chance that any of the here-and-gone-again creatures might guess her true identity.

They gave up after a final wave of weapons and spells that left the she-bear lying on her side, oozing green ichor onto the moss, and Halaern nursing an empty weapon hand that swelled to twice its proper size in the space of three heartbeats.

"Let me help."

"No. Many thanks for your arm, dear lady, but my wound is nothing." He closed his eyes and furrowed his brow. The verdigrised circlet shimmered, surrounding Halaern with a pine-scented mist. When it was gone, so too was the swelling in his hand and all the other angry scratches he'd taken on his arms and face. "A gift from a friend. And you? Were you harmed."

"No," she said with a smile, and would have teased him a bit, if the she-bear hadn't tried to rise from the moss.

Maddened by pain, magic, and fear for her cubs, the bear took them for enemies. Alassra readied the same spell she'd used on young Ebroin while Halaern—who had yet to recognize his "friend," placed himself in harm's way.

The she-bear dropped to three feet, holding a maimed forepaw off the ground. Making an eerie sound in the depths of her throat she began to sway from side to side, as if indecision as well as pain, were truly tearing her apart. Finally she stood still and allowed the forester to place his hands on either side of her head. Staring into her eyes, Halaern quieted the bear and gained her trust. She flopped to the ground with a weary sigh and let him probe her wounds.

"I can heal her, even her paw, once the spells wear off. She's agreed to be calm until then."

Halaern left the bear on her side while he examined her cubs. Alassra had already looked at them. The mewling cub was more frightened than hurt; healing its mother would be all the healing it would need. Not so for the second cub. The dark seelie shapeshifting spells had transformed its hindquarters into a corrosive ooze. It might die before the spell wore off; it would certainly die afterward, no matter what she or Halaern did. The forester needed several moments to reach the same conclusions. He sat back on his heels, his hands limp across his thighs.

"There's nothing else you can do," Alassra said gently. "If you healed the cub now, it would still be crippled. If you

wait, it will die in agony. Right now, it is unconscious, and feels nothing."

Halaern nodded. He placed his hands around the furry throat and with a single, sure movement, ended its life.

"They are evil, my friend. Death has an honored place in the Yuirwood, but not evil. They don't belong here."

Thinking of the Sunglade, Alassra hoped her Cha'Tel'Quessir forester was correct. She offered him a hand up and he accepted. Wrist against wrist, Halaern recognized his queen as he rose. He became awkward and tongue-tied.

"My lady . . . my queen. I didn't . . . couldn't... I had your message, my queen, but I didn't expect you."

He tried to kneel; Alassra stopped him with an embrace.

"I was late. I didn't tell you half of what you needed to know. And, above all, dear friend, you had more important matters on your mind."

The embrace became a kiss that represented more than friendship. Alassra drew her fingers through his partly braided hair. They gazed at each other, saying nothing for several heartbeats.

"It is good to see you in the Yuirwood," Halaern said when there was once again an arm's length between them.

Of all the men Alassra had met and loved in her long life, Trovar Halaern was one she'd never meant to love her in return. But he was younger than Ebroin when they first met, and she'd appeared very much as she appeared right now.

"And you, forester. I should come to the Yuirwood more often."

"You should, dear lady."

There was no point to saying Halaern should come more often to Velprintalar. He came to the city when he had to; and looked like a feral cat trapped in an iron cage.

"Shall we heal mother bear?"

"With your help, there's no need to wait till the spell wears off." Halaern knelt and laid hands on the bear again. "With your help, my queen, it's a wonder any of those evil things

got away."

"If I'd helped in that way, the wonder would be that you were still speaking to me."

Tension drained from the forester's face as he flashed a wry grin. "I might have made an exception."

"You're not saying you'd accept a gift, are you?"

The Simbul dispelled the shapeshifting magic, then stood back and let Halaern finish the healing. The bear lumbered to her feet. She called her cubs, greeted the one that came, then nuzzled the one that didn't.

"You have the other one," the forester said without sentimentality. "Raise it well."

She stared at her Cha'Tel'Quessir protector with great, liquid eyes before leading her living cub away. A silent moment passed. Halaern turned to his queen.

"In conscience, I couldn't refuse any gift, my lady. There's darkness loose in the Yuirwood, and I cannot drive it out."

"Does the darkness bear the name Zandilar or Zandilar's Dancer?" the Simbul asked as she became herself long enough to remove a simple topaz ring from the fourth finger of her right hand.

"If it has a name, my queen"—Halaern took the ring gingerly—"I have not learned it."

The forester had never worn a ring of any kind before. He placed it on a finger and regarded his hand as if it, too, had been touched by darkness. She told him what it could do and how to call forth its power. Well before the Simbul finished, Halaern's face was tense and troubled again.

"Let me tell you why I've come, dear friend, then perhaps it will be easier for you to share your burdens with me. I'm looking for a Cha'Tel'Quessir youth named Ebroin, of MightyTree, I think. I brought him to the Yuirwood the other night. More accurately: he brought me. He has a horse, a twilight colt named Zandilar's Dancer."

Halaern began walking; the Simbul kept pace beside him.

"The MightyTree are three days' walking from here. They are

a balanced kindred," by which the forester meant that the MightyTree elders steered the family in the middle current between their Yuirwood heritage and tolerance for those who dwelt outside the forest. "I don't recall the name Ebroin, but Zandilar the Dancer, as I'm sure you know, is a Sunblade name."

"And a horse named Zandilar's Dancer?"

The forester shrugged. "In the darkest chambers of the deepest caves there are paintings on the walls. I've seen horses there, horses with spots, horses the color of twilight and other animals that are long gone from the Yuirwood. And I've heard that there are other caves where a maiden leads a horse that the hunters follow."

"I should like to see these paintings ..."

Trovar Halaern looked straight ahead and said nothing.

"It is difficult for you, isn't it? Being Yuirwood and knowing me as you do."

He sighed. "With the Tel'Quessir in Retreat and your gods having warred and changed so recently, there is a sense in the Yuirwood that this is the time for the Cha'Tel'Quessir to seize their destiny. But there is no sense—no clear sense—what our destiny might be. Some say wait, others say leap. Most are caught in the middle."

The Simbul took his hand as they walked. "I heard the name Zandilar's Dancer in a dream the night after Ebroin's colt was born. The colt is in the Yuirwood now, with Ebroin and someone else. I don't know who that other person is, a man, I think. Most likely Cha'Tel'Quessir, but possibly a Red Wizard. Something is changing in the Yuirwood, dear friend, and its echoes can be heard throughout Faerun. Two nights past I met with three elven sages from Evermeet. I came away with more questions than answers; that's the Tel'Quessir way, isn't it? I'll share them all with you, but I need your help, dear friend: I need to find Ebroin and his horse. I need to see those who would seize their destiny regardless of the consequences, and I need to see them

through these eyes."

"I'll start looking for this Ebroin of MightyTree and his horse. For the other, the best I can do is put you in the path of Rizcarn—"

The Simbul interrupted her forester. "Rizcarn? That's a name Ebroin mentioned. His father's name. His dead father, I thought; there was a black bead against his neck."

Halaern worried his lower lip.

"Problems? Coincidences?" the Simbul asked.

"If you'd asked me at Midsummer, I'd've said Rizcarn of GoldenMoss was dead these past seven years. Seems, though, that I've been wrong, that he was off prowling other forests. He's back, preaching Relkath's return, same as before. Always was a strange one. GoldenMoss hunters found him living wild."

The Simbul raised an eyebrow. Tales of Cha'Tel'Quessir raised by the Yuirwood itself were rampant in the forest. Few, if any, were believable.

"It's what they say and no one challenges them. Not MightyTree."

"Not a balanced sort, this Rizcarn?"

Halaern shook his head, searching for the right words.

"Hardly. He trekked from one end of the Yuirwood to the other, carving Relkath's rune in tree bark. We thought him slightly mad, completely harmless. No one paid attention."

"But they are now, now that he's come back.?"

"He's called all Cha'Tel'Quessir to the Sunglade. I've kept a distance, my queen, but others are listening. I didn't take him seriously. He's not the first, my queen, to dance in the Sunglade. Nothing's happened there before, but if he's a Red Wizard in disguise ... I will climb trees and look farther than I have. There are other ways."

The Simbul stopped walking and used the leverage their clasped hands provided to turn them face to face. "No, dear friend. I will look closely at this Rizcarn of GoldenMoss. You will look for Red Wizards in the Yuirwood."

"Come home with me, my queen. We'll eat and talk until midnight, and tomorrow I will take you across Rizcarn's path."

The Simbul knew she shouldn't; Alassra said she'd be delighted.

20

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Evening, the twenty-first day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Four days had passed since Bro had surrendered the twilight colt to Zandilar. Four days in which he'd followed Rizcarn from one tree-family to the next, staying in the shadows while Rizcarn summoned the Cha'Tel'Quessir to the Sunglade at the full moon. There were four days, four nights until the moon rose full; nearly thirty Cha'Tel'Quessir men and women trekked with them already. At the rate their camp was growing, there'd be more Cha'Tel'Quessir when they reached the Sunglade than Bro had ever seen in one place.

They wouldn't have all the Cha'Tel'Quessir in the Yuirwood. There were folk who walked away shaking their heads when they heard Rizcarn rant about waking trees and dancing with stones. One tree-family, Deep Well, had run them off. That had been the first day, when it had only been him, Rizcarn, and an old man named Lanig whom Bro remembered vaguely from his boyhood. Elders listened to Rizcarn now that he had thirty Cha'Tel'Quessir walking with him—at least they pretended to.

Watching the elders, Bro had seen doubt and anxiety on their faces. The same doubts and anxieties he felt each sunset when Rizcarn called a halt for the night. Rizcarn said something had to be done, like building campfires or waking the trees, and folk did it, not mindlessly, the way Thayan slaves were said to obey, but without asking the questions folk should ask.

Not about campfires—campfires didn't need questions.

Questions about trees and stones and what was going to happen after the Sunblade. Of course, Bro hadn't asked those questions either.

The Cha'Tel'Quessir with them called him Rizcarn's son, not Ebroin or Bro, or even Ember as they'd called him when he was twelve and following his father—the father he knew was his—from tree to tree. They didn't expect him to do anything except be Rizcarn's son and sleep in the center of the camp, where Rizcarn would have slept, if Rizcarn had slept. He wasn't Zandilar's chosen young man, not anymore. Lanig would dance with Zandilar and ride Zandilar's Dancer.

Rizcarn hadn't slept or eaten since Zandilar had taken the colt into the ground. Each night, once the camp was set and cooking aromas filled the air, Rizcarn wandered off, not to be seen again until morning. Folk ate; food, at least, was both plentiful and palatable now. And folk talked until the watches were drawn for the night. They talked about Cha'Tel'Quessir who'd been dead for generations and they talked about the future when everything would change and become wonderful.

Bro had lived through days when everything changed and everything hadn't become wonderful, so when they talked about the future—after the meal was finished and someone brought out a skin or two of honey wine—he'd sulk off by himself.

Last night and the night before, Lanig had come to tell him his place in the night-watch, but not tonight. Tonight they had enough willing Cha'Tel'Quessir in camp. They didn't need Rizcarn's son to do anything but sleep.

"Your pallet is ready," Lanig said. "Will you come sleep with us? It's a lot of walking we do each day. Your father wants you to sleep, son. Will you come to your place? Will you?" Bro started for the center of the camp. He'd learned the hard way that Lanig wouldn't stop talking until he obeyed.

Later, sleepless himself, staring at the stars, and listening to the snores around him, Bro revised his opinion of his

companions. It wasn't that they treated him as if he were still twelve, it was that they acted as if the past seven years hadn't happened. Most of the nearby Cha'Tel'Quessir had followed Rizcarn before. They'd simply picked up where they'd left off.

Sitting up on his pallet of leaf-filled leather, Bro studied the camp with growing apprehension. His right hand fell to his waist where he kept the Simbul's knife. Rubbing its studded leather hilt had become a habit. Sometimes—like tonight—when rubbing wasn't enough to steady him, Bro unsheathed the knife and stared at the blade until he lost himself in its wavy patterns.

"Did you come looking for me?" he whispered to the absent queen. "I was a squirrel for an afternoon. A squirrel would've had more sense than to do what I'm doing. I've been thinking ... maybe I should have let you steal Zandilar's Dancer. You said a worthy goddess wouldn't have let Shali die just so I'd bring Dancer into the Yuirwood. I hope you're right. I hope it's not too late."

Bro laced her boots over his ankles and headed out of the camp. Rizcarn said he spent the night praying to Relkath. Bro figured he'd find the biggest tree and find his father, too.

By night the Yuirwood shimmered with pale colors. Paths were dark ribbons weaving across the forest floor. Bro walked to the latrine pits and past them. He was resigned to an all-night, almost aimless search when he spotted a tree trunk where one of Relkath's runes sparkled. Rizcarn wasn't by that tree, but it gave Bro an idea. He climbed high into its branches. From the crown he saw other, similarly marked trees and one that was bright as a torch.

Rizcarn was there, eyes closed, arms folded and oblivious to the world. Bro had tried to be quiet as he walked through the Yuirwood, but he was no ranger, no forester. Crackling leaves had heralded his every step. Rizcarn should have heard him. Or maybe not. The light that had guided Bro

wasn't coming from a tree-trunk carving. It formed a sphere that centered around Rizcarn's head as bright as sunshine, soft as moonlight, and with no source other than the seated Cha'Tel'Quessir.

The sight was utterly peaceful and unnerving. Bro wanted to run away, but his body wasn't listening. He did what he'd come to do, instead.

"Rizcarn? Rizcarn, I'd like to talk to you." No response. Indignation eroded Bro's fear. He strode forward. "Rizcarn! Talk to me!"

Rizcarn shuddered. His eyes opened and Bro stopped short. Rizcarn's eyes were truly luminous: pure, pupiless white, and the source of the light. Bro clutched the Simbul's knife, still in its sheath. He tried to pray, but no god's name came to his mind; he took refuge in old habits.

"Poppa. Poppa, please. I was—I am your son. You say you were roaming other forests, but I know better—at least, I know something different. I want to believe you, Poppa; I truly do. If there's a future for the Cha'Tel'Quessir, I want to be a part of it. I'd like to help you make the trees remember again, and the rocks, but you've told lies and I don't know what to believe anymore. Poppa, why are we going to the Sunglade. What's truly going to happen there?"

"Ebroin? Ebroin, you're troubled. Come; sit beside me and tell me what troubles you. It's your mother, isn't it?"

Bro nodded before he could stop himself.

"You didn't know your mother, Ebroin. She lived free when I met her: no cottages, no hearth." Rizcarn grinned and shook his head. "Hardly any clothes, except her own hair and wolf skin. I thought Shali was the Yuir come to life and she thought... I don't know what she thought; I never did. MightyTree blessed us; they thought they'd never see either of us again. Funny thing: I thought so too. Thought we'd live free together. She said no, there had to be a child first: you. A child, a hearth, a home. I tried, Ebroin. I tried, but I can't live in one place. She said, all right, a child's not forever;

we'll live free after he's grown.

"Every time I came back, Ebroin, she was more beautiful than before, but her roots had gone deeper. I wanted you to grow quickly, before I lost her. I took you with me, hoping she'd follow us. You know she didn't. When we came back, she said she wanted another child."

Bro couldn't—wouldn't—imagine his mother dressed in her own hair and a wolf skin. For him Shali was the one-room cottage, the hearth with its ever-simmering pots, the little garden weaving between sunlight and shadow beneath the trees. She loved the forest, but for her the forest began on her doorstep and ended a hundred paces farther on.

"I told her no, Ebroin. We argued. I wanted the woman I loved, the woman who lived free in the Yuirwood. She wanted something else, and that was the end. She knew I wasn't coming back."

Bro's strength failed; habit kept him standing. A thousand memories clamored for his attention. Yes, Shali was the cottage, the hearth, and the garden, but didn't he remember her standing in the sun, the moon, or the rain, staring up at the trees as if she knew their names? And of all those times when Rizcarn came home and he got sent to stay with his cousins, wasn't that last time—when they'd come home together—different? A twelve-year-old didn't know the subtle language of adults in love and anger. A nineteen-year-old still didn't know it well, but he remembered the important parts.

These were bits of understanding Bro would rather not have had, but unlike everything else Rizcarn had said lately, these words had the ring of truth to them. They weren't the answers he'd come looking for, but they were answers.

"You died, Poppa."

"She didn't want me to leave."

"I saw you buried."

"A body. I hadn't finished Relkath's work."

"She loved you, Poppa, and you loved her."

"Did I say otherwise?"

"I was born! I kept the two of you apart! You'd be living free, if I hadn't happened."

"A tree," Rizcarn said patiently, "doesn't grow until a seed's been planted."

Shivers raced down Bro's spine. Those were Shali's words, her favorite words in the spring when she turned the soil in her garden and when she gave him motherly advice he didn't want to hear. Hearing them from Rizcarn pushed Bro to the edge of belief. He reached into his shirt neck, withdrawing his talisman beads and Shali's, which he'd looped around his while they'd walked through the swamps.

"Can we go to MightyTree on our way to the Sunglade? Will you ... ?" In the back of his mind Bro conceived the one gesture that would answer so many of his lingering questions. "Can we go together to tell them what happened in Sulalk?"

The light around Rizcarn faded. They stood in a quarter-moon's light filtered through the summer trees. Bro couldn't see his father's face as Rizcarn freed Shali's talismans and hung them around his own neck. He breathed deep and slow and refused to blink.

"We'll go together," Rizcarn said softly. He put his hands on Bro's shoulders and drew him into an embrace. "We'll leave tomorrow."

Bro didn't trust himself to speak. He nodded, instead, and his eyes overflowed down his cheeks, his chin, onto his father's neck. Ashamed, he tried to jerk free. Rizcarn wouldn't let him go; after a heartbeat, he stopped trying.

"You're weary, son. You've carried too much for too long without my help. I'm sorry. Now, go and rest—sleep, if you can—we've got a lot of walking ahead of us."

Sniffing tears, Bro allowed his father to hug him tightly, as hugs had been when he was half as tall as he'd become. "I'm sorry," he confessed when they separated.

"Don't be."

Bro forced a smile and started back to the camp. He'd taken about ten steps—Rizcarn's light had returned, casting shadows onto the path ahead of him. Something thumped between his shoulder blade and his ribs: his father tossing acorns at him, the way his father sometimes had, in jest.

More than an acorn.

Thump became ache became numbness and pain together.

Not an acorn at all, but something that stuck in him.

"Zandilar!"

Not an acorn—an arrow. Bro had been struck by an arrow and imagined it protruding from his back. He thought he should keep walking. He thought he should be able to walk. Men walked with their wounds, he'd seen them. Just lift one foot, move it forward, put it down. The foot dragged and Bro lost his balance, very slowly.

The light grew thicker as he fell, but not thick enough or fast enough to keep him upright.

"Zandilar—not my son!"

The light brightened, became too bright. Bro closed his eyes. One knee had touched the ground before he floated into darkness.

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"Gently, gently!"

"Hold him steady."

"Keep him still!"

Bro heard the voices first, then he felt the pain, like fire piercing him back to front. The arrow. He remembered he'd been struck by an arrow. Where? He remembered his father, surrounded by light. He remembered the light surrounding him as he fell and opened his eyes.

"Don't talk, Rizcarn's son."

"Lie easy."

He was on open ground, surrounded by torchlit faces, all worried, all talking. Lie easy, they told him—of all requests, that one was impossible. The arrow was in his right-side rib cage, level with his heart. He wanted to lie on his face; he

thought it would hurt less, but grasping hands kept him up on his left side. Every shallow breath was agony.

Someone Bro knew but couldn't name—he couldn't name anyone except himself just then—grabbed his right wrist and pulled his arm straight. Bro heard himself screaming. Then there was a wicked knife glinting in the light. They slashed his shirt. Someone touched the arrow and he screamed again, fighting the man at his wrist.

"It's got to come out, Rizcarn's son," that man said, changing his grip so their fingers interlaced.

"Don't let me die," Bro whispered. "Don't. Poppa?"

"Not here. Be brave."

He tried, but there was one long scream in his throat from the moment they started pushing the arrow forward. His voice broke when his flesh did. He was crying, pleading for the torture to end, as they broke the arrowhead off and screaming while they withdrew the shaft.

"The worst is over," someone said; someone lied.

Pain blurred Bro's hearing as well as his vision. Though he couldn't hear clearly, he knew they didn't like the looks of the arrow. He caught the word "poison."

Bro started shaking. At the very least, poison meant enlarging the wounds and cauterizing them with red-hot steel. The Cha'Tel'Quessir surrounding Bro passed around the knife they'd used to slash his shirt.

Bro knew it had to be done and knew, too, that there was a better way, a better knife.

"No," he insisted, trying to free his right arm.

"S'got to be done, Rizcarn's son," the man holding him said.

"My knife. Use my knife. You've got to use my knife."

The Simbul's knife was too small, someone said while it was still in its sheath. Then, it was too fancy, too well-forged for the brute work of cauterizing a wound. A woman asked where he'd gotten it, who'd owned it before—questions Bro didn't have to answer with two bleeding holes in his side.

The man holding his arm advised Bro to close his eyes and

pinched him hard to distract him from the first of the cuts. Bro's legs spasmed; the heaviest men in the camp sat on his hips to keep him still. Someone said he'd faint soon and it would be easier after that.

But Bro didn't faint while they cut him or when they poured honey wine on the enlarged wounds. He didn't faint when he saw his knife moving toward him, lashed between two sticks and distorting the night air with its dull-red heat. Once Bro saw the knife, he couldn't look away.

Someone put his hand over Bro's eyes. Agony took him by surprise, and, finally, he fainted.

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Pale sunlight had replaced the stars when Bro opened his eyes again. His chest was tight in bandages that reeked of wine and bitter herbs. Separate bandages bound his arm to his waist. He was in Rizcarn's camp, propped up against a fallen tree. A man knelt beside him, Bro recognized him as the one who'd held his arm during the night and remembered his name, as well: Yongour. He held a wooden mug that steamed and stank worse than the bandages.

"A purgative. If any poison lingers."

Not thinking, Bro reached with the arm that was bound to his waist. Embarrassed and hurting, he warded the mug away with his left arm and immediately felt for the Simbul's knife. It was where it belonged. He drew it out for examination.

"That's a fine knife, Rizcarn's son, and nothing that you got while living in a dirt-eaters' village. Now drink this while it's hot."

Bro refused for half a heartbeat, then wisdom prevailed. He took the mug from Yongour's hand and drained it in several unpleasant gulps. The mug slipped through Bro's fingers as he passed out again.

His consciousness flickered all morning. It was mid-afternoon before Bro was alert again. Front and back, shoulder to waist, he was in pain, though nothing like the previous

night. A deep breath convinced him he could not get to his feet or walk anywhere before sundown. Then he realized no one had walked anywhere; the camp hadn't moved. The Cha'Tel'Quessir had stayed put, waiting for him to live or die before Rizcarn led them all to MightyTree.

"Poppa?" he asked after the woman tending him had given him a drink of water. "Rizcarn. Can I see him? Will you tell him I'm awake?"

"Not here," she replied, the same answer he'd gotten last night before they pulled the arrow.

"Where is he? I want to talk to him ... tell him I'm better."

"Rizcarn's gone. He came back at dawn, before you woke. He said the gods had spoken when you fell and that there were things he had to do alone. We're to wait here until he returns."

The bandages tightened over Bro's ribs. "Did he say where he was going?"

"Headed east, that's all. Toward the Sunglade."

Toward MightyTree. Bro put his hand on his neck. His talisman beads were there. Shali's were gone. He'd given them to his father; he'd been a fool. A fool to look for Rizcarn; a worse fool to swallow anything Rizcarn said. Rizcarn had beguiled him by talking about Shali. He'd soothed Bro's surface hurts and left his deeper questions unanswered.

"You'll be well again, Rizcarn's son." The woman misunderstood his despair. "Walking, climbing trees, dancing in the Sunglade."

Dancing in the Sunglade with Zandilar. Rizcarn had called Zandilar's name as he fell. Bro arched his back against the tree trunk, savoring the pain.

"Leave me," he asked. "I need to rest."

Bro stared at the sun. His eyes burned; he shut them. The woman walked away. He let the tears flow until there were no more. Then he tried to stand.

"Not so fast, Ebroin."

A woman he'd never seen before sat on the fallen trunk on his unharmed side. He couldn't see her clearly in the sun, but she'd known his name. Bro thought that was a good sign, though Rizcarn had called him Ebroin, too.

He tried again to stand. She laid her hand on his good shoulder. Her fingers were ice; they froze his breath in his lungs.

"They told me you wanted to rest."

She'd withdrawn her hand and moved slightly, so he could see her better. She bristled with steel weapons and brass studs. Her fitted boots and wine-dyed leathers hadn't been put together in the Yuirwood, but she was, without doubt, Cha'Tel'Quessir. Though there was nothing extraordinary about her brown hair, her brown eyes, Bro couldn't keep himself from staring.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Call me Chayan. You've seen a woman before, haven't you?"

He wondered if he had and wondered, too, where the pain had gone. "Where are you from?"

"A bit of everywhere, but I was born in the Yuirwood, same as you. Left it, too; it's a long story. I got the urge to come back a while ago. When I got here, I heard your father was going to wake the gods in the Sunglade and figured that's what I'd come home for. Anything else you want to know, Ebroin?"

A hundred things, maybe a thousand, but they could wait. The pain was back, less intense than before, but still potent. Bro braced his good arm behind him. "I've got to get up, catch up with my father."

"Not a chance." Chayan laid her hand on him again. It wasn't cold this time, but just as effective in keeping him pressed against the log. "Wherever your father's gone, he's got a day's start on you. You couldn't catch him if you were sound, which you're not. You need a day's rest, which some Cha'Tel'Quessir think you've earned."

"You?" Bro blushed and didn't believe he'd said that.

"When I told the Cha'Tel'Quessir in charge—" Chayan tipped her head toward the center of the camp—"that I'd tended more than my share of arrow wounds fighting the Tuigans, they sent me over here to tend yours. They'd lose faith in me if I let you wander."

"You fought the Tuigans? You've been in the East?" Bro began to suspect that his good sense had leaked away with his blood. He stopped caring when Chayan threw back her hair and laughed.

"I've been everywhere, Ebroin, and I've fought with everyone. I'll fight with you, too, if you try to get up again. I want to look at your wounds. Are you going to behave like an intelligent man? Or am I going to have to knock some good behavior into you?"

For a moment—for no good reason—Chayan reminded Bro of the Simbul. Then he'd promised to behave intelligently and she was poking at his wounds.

"Who shot you?"

Bro couldn't answer. He had his teeth clenched, pretending nothing hurt. By the time he trusted himself enough to open his mouth, they weren't alone. Yongour challenged Chayan, who stood up with a confident smile.

"He was talking nonsense. I thought the wounds might be festering; they're not. I'd like to see the arrow that pierced him."

Yongour said, "Rizcarn's son was pierced by the gods."

Bro didn't like the sound of that for many reasons and was relieved to see Chayan didn't either.

"Shot by the gods and you cauterized the wound? That's a strange sort of faith. The gods don't miss, and when they use poison they get it direct from Talona. The arrow?"

It took another few rounds of discussion, but the arrow arrived, bigger than Bro imagined it would be and stained with his blood.

"It's not Cha'Tel'Quessir," Yongour insisted. "Not Aglarondan at all."

"I can see that," Chayan agreed with a tone as cold as her icicle touch.

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The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Afternoon, the twenty-second day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Alassra examined both pieces of the arrow the Cha'Tel'Quessir had removed from Bro's side. She recognized it without magic. It came from Thay.

She did use magic on the arrow, swiftly, surely, and without fear that it would be detected. Over the centuries, Alassra had absorbed a number of useful spells—some simple, some not. They'd become as much a part of her as her eyes or ears and when she disguised herself those spells were disguised as well. The ruse would never fool Elminster or another masterful wizard, but in the Yuirwood, among Cha'Tel'Quessir who couldn't cast more than three spells between them, her mind asked questions; her fingers perceived answers as natural as breath, as quick as a single beat of her heart.

The arrow had no magical properties. It had been steeped in a nasty poison that would have condemned young Ebroin to a drawn-out, agonizing death if the Cha'Tel'Quessir hadn't tended the wounds with her knife. The feathered, spiral vanes at its base, so difficult to shape precisely and the reason the Cha'Tel'Quessir thought it had been shot from a god's bow, were the work of a Thayan master fletcher, almost certainly working for a zulkir. With a drop of quicksilver and a sprig of betony the Simbul could have deduced which zulkir but that would have undone her disguise.

Mythrell'aa was the only zulkir with reason to put a slow-poison arrow in poor Ebroin's back and leave his father alive, though that assumed she wasn't trying to abduct Ebroin as she'd taken Lailomun. Trovar Halaern was roaming the nearby forest. He'd find the answer and eliminate the

guesses. Meanwhile, the Simbul would get a different sort of answer from the Cha'Tel'Quessir.

"Why would gods shoot an arrow at Ebroin?" she asked the man who'd handed her the arrow.

"Not at Rizcarn's son, at Rizcarn himself, to keep him from leading us to the Sunblade. There are many who wish the Yuirwood and the Cha'Tel'Quessir to remain apart."

The Simbul nodded, silently agreeing with Halaern's opinion: Rizcarn's followers were passionate believers in something no outsider could understand. She pitied Bro who sat in shadows while others stood close and talked over his head. From the carnage in Sulalk to Yuirwood fantasies in one week was a long, tortured journey.

"Our Rizcarn has enemies," a woman assured Alassra. "The Simbul would tear the Yuirwood apart to stop him, if she knew his plans."

The Simbul asked, in her sweetest voice, "Why ever would she do that? When I left Aglarond, the Simbul was the Yuirwood's staunch defender against Thay."

"Aglarond and Thay aren't the Yuirwood. The Yuirwood won't need Aglarond or its queen once our gods are awake. The Yuirwood will swallow the world once it's awake again!" the woman spoke in hushed, urgent tones, sharing some treasured secret.

Alassra nodded. These people weren't searching for the mysterious Cha'Tel'Quessir heritage. These people had taken leave of their senses—which, from a queen's perspective was neither harmless or trivial. Without half trying, the Simbul could think of a score of magical ways to blind ordinary folk or corrupt them, and the Red Wizards of Thay knew them all.

Punctured Ebroin notwithstanding, the person Alassra truly wanted to see was Rizcarn. She was tempted to find her forester, tell him to keep an eye on these lost sheep, and pursue the more interesting quarry herself. She even considered taking Bro with her, but to catch up with Rizcarn,

she'd have to heal his son and she'd probably wind up revealing herself in the process. Waiting in the camp while healing him more slowly with subtle magic these folk might readily believe came from the Yuirwood gods, became the more rational option.

As for what Ebroin might think or want, Alassra could see him sinking into despair near her knees. Once he'd seen the arrow that pierced him, seen how close he'd come to dying, he'd stopped feeling lucky.

"Rizcarn's son needs rest." Alassra took a step back from the log, hoping the Cha'Tel'Quessir would follow her. She wouldn't resort to spells if simple persuasion would suffice. "He'll need food, too. We all will. I don't see any fires burning."

Men and women straightened their backs as if startled. They looked around, saw what Alassra had seen and hurried to get the cooking fires going. Purposeful activity, which had been lacking when she arrived, spread through the camp, confirming the Simbul's suspicion that without Rizcarn's presence, the magic that kept his followers together was unravelling.

"Thank you, Chayan," The boy struggled to make himself presentable in clothes that were ragged when they left Sulalk and were slashed, bloodstained ruins now. "They don't listen to me, not truly. I don't think they see me at all. I'm Rizcarn's son, something to be brought along with the baggage until we get to the Sunglade."

Alassra looked through his disguise. Bro was young and unsure of himself, but he wasn't a boy. He'd grown since she left him with a strand of her hair knotted around his wrist. Shock and loss of blood accounted for much of the change, but finding his father must not have been easy. And there was the small matter of Zandilar's Dancer. The horse wasn't in the camp; there were no horse images in the surface thoughts she'd skimmed from the Cha'Tel'Quessir while they surrounded her.

If Bro had lost his horse, that would account for the deep melancholy Alassra sensed around him. She couldn't ask; he had to bring the subject up.

"That shirt's seen better days. Got another one?" she asked, because Chayan wouldn't know he'd left Sulalk empty-handed. Bro shook his head and fussed with his shirt some more. "Never mind, I've got a spare in my kit."

Helping him into it gave Alassra another opportunity to close his wounds with a healing salve. Bro complained of her icy hands, an unavoidable consequence of the salve; she complained that he favored his injuries more than necessary.

"If Zandilar wants me dead, nothing will save me."

"Do you truly think a goddess shot that arrow?"

He stared at his feet; Alassra stared at them, too, and at her boots, scuffed, scratched and muddied almost beyond recognition.

"Everyone else was asleep in the camp, except for the guards and Rizcarn. If I don't believe what they tell me, then I've got to ask myself if I think that my father put an arrow in my back."

So, he had considered that possibility and hadn't gotten around to wondering where she might have been last night—with Trovar Halaern, for an extra day of discussion, and more, but she couldn't tell him that. Instead, she asked, "Well, do you?"

"Rizcarn didn't have a bow. He never was much of an archer, and that arrow, it wasn't a Cha'Tel'Quessir arrow. It wasn't an Aglarondan arrow, either. I never saw anything like it before."

Alassra seized an opportunity. "I have. It was a Thayan war arrow thick enough to pierce lightweight chain mail and spiral fletching to make it twirl as it broke your skin, to make the entry wound bigger. That fletching also slows it down so it's less likely to pop out your other side. Keeps the poison where it's meant to be: inside the victim. It was shot from a short, heavy bow by someone perched in a tree. An easy

shot, I'd guess, less than fifty paces, and either a poor archer, or a very good one, to miss your heart by a double handspan."

Bro's eyes were wide and his jaw had dropped.

"I told you, Ebroin, I've fought everyone, everywhere. I won't let you die and I won't let you starve, either." She offered him a journey cake that Halaern's sister, Gren, had baked.

He stared at the flat bread with its bright berry jewels and nuts. Alassra was sure he'd take it, but he turned away instead.

"Not now. Not yet. I've—" He glanced east, where the grass beyond the camp was trampled flat. "I've got to stand and walk before I can eat."

She understood. Odds were, the Cha'Tel'Quessir had been giving him purgatives all day. Alassra got to her feet.

"No better time to start," she offered him a hand up.

Bro got dizzy as he rose and lost his balance. Alassra caught him easily. His face was flushed; he wouldn't meet her eyes. Embarrassment. . . she hoped. They made their way slowly east, out of the camp. The Simbul offered to leave him alone for a few moments and he blushed spectacularly. Embarrassment, she decided, with no small relief, and headed down slope to the camp stream for water.

Bro, looking seedy, had perched himself on a rock when she returned. Honestly concerned that he might have opened one of the wounds, Alassra ordered him out of his shirt. The wounds were healing nicely beneath their cautery scabs; he'd have a handsome set of scars with which to impress his lady friends, once he stopped blushing whenever a woman looked at him. Since the wounds were exposed, Alassra administered another dose of her healing potion, but what Bro needed more was food and friendship. She offered both in the form of Gren's journey cake.

He took the cake and the Simbul's hand as well, not quite certain what to do with it, but determined not to let it go.

"Put those thoughts clear out of your mind, Ebroin."

The warning was for his own good. If all went well, Chayan of SilverBranch would disappear from Bro's life and if it didn't, she'd seen what loving the Simbul had done to Trovar Halaern. She didn't want to see it again.

Bro ate slowly and in physical silence. His thoughts were another matter. Alassra had all she could do not to hear his entire life and all his adolescent doubts. The turmoil wasn't entirely without useful information. The Simbul caught images of Zandilar's Dancer, a swamp she didn't recognize, and a luminous mist Bro called Zandilar, which had absorbed the horse into the ground.

Interesting. Interesting at the very least.

"You're an orphan, too."

Bro interrupted Alassra's thoughts. She realized she'd been toying with her Cha'Tel'Quessir beads, two of which were smooth and black. It was easier not to have parents when you didn't want to have a past. Most folk wouldn't ask questions, but most folk hadn't lost their mother and regained their father in the past week.

"Long ago. A fire." She kept her stories simple and told them with great reluctance. On the other hand, Chayan didn't know Rizcarn had recently returned from the dead. Alassra seized an opportunity. "I heard you called Rizcarn's son. Did I miss something?"

Bro explained himself, the day he saw his father die, the black bead he'd worn for seven years while he lived in a human village, and his odyssey through the Yuirwood. He spoke in awkward, mumbled phrases. "At first I didn't believe my father could have come back. Then I wondered if maybe he hadn't died. Now I think maybe my father was never truly alive, that he was some sort of forest spirit who came into my mother's life."

The Simbul had had similar thoughts, but kept them to herself. "If your father was a forest spirit, what would that make you?"

"The same as Zandilar's Dancer: something that was born,

but doesn't have its own life."

The opportunity she'd had been waiting for: "Who's Zandilar's Dancer?"

"A horse," Bro began and filled in another layer that included the destruction of Sulalk and his encounter with the Simbul. "She wanted to steal Dancer for herself," he told the woman he thought was Cha'Tel'Quessir. "Maybe I shouldn't have stopped her. It doesn't matter, does it? Dancer's gone either way, and I heard Rizcarn shout Zandilar's name after he put an arrow in my back."

Alassra resisted the urge to defend her own actions; she defended Rizcarn instead. "Ebroin, your father didn't shoot that arrow."

"How can you be so sure, Chayan?"

"Because the entry wound is here."

Alassra reached toward Bro's back. He flinched and, favoring his right side, teetered backward on the rock. To keep his balance, the young man had to flail both arms in broad movements that, undoubtedly, hurt. Indignant and simmering, he glared at her through a curtain of dishevelled hair. Undeterred, Alassra clamped a hand on his forearm and finished what she'd been saying.

"The exit wound they made to break the arrow out, is here, two ribs lower. If your father had shot the arrow, it would have been going up, not down, when it entered you."

Bro said, "Oh," and stared at Alassra's hand until she removed it.

Their eyes met, his so filled with hurt and lost innocence that Alassra swore the next time she cast a Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise she'd cross her eyes and cover herself with warts.

"I smell food cooking in the camp." She tried to end the awkward silence. "Let's get ourselves some supper before it all disappears."

"You go. I want to get a drink from the stream."

"The way you're moving, Ebroin, you'll tumble in and drown."

She'd hoped that would be enough to straighten Bro's spine. When it wasn't and he did stumble heading down the slope she hurried to his side.

"I don't need your help."

"Prove it."

Bro did, using his right arm to steady himself as he knelt on the rocks to drink cold, fresh water. Getting up would be harder. Alassra made a show of looking the other way; he'd have to ask, if he wanted help. Her thoughts wandered: Rizcarn awakening the old Yuirwood gods ... if the Zandilar she'd glimpsed in Bro's thoughts were a god . . . the quicksilver transformations of a young man's heart ... no wonder she turned to Elminster; the Old Mage knew his own heart. . . the body sticking out of the brush on the far side of the stream.

The body...?

Alassra rubbed her eyes. It couldn't have been there just a little while ago when she came down to the stream herself; she couldn't have failed to notice a corpse less than a hundred paces away from her nose. Yet one or the other had to be true. From her current vantage the Simbul could see a leg, naked except for a laced buskin, and a blood-covered arm, enough to guess that the body belonged to a man and the man was Cha'Tel'Quessir. She thought of Halaern, then the absent Rizcarn.

And let her thoughts go. Either way, Bro had seen enough of raw death. She'd get him back to the camp, eating supper and sneak back here alone. It would be easier to do her work without witnesses anyway.

"Chayan!"

Another miscast plan: Bro had spotted the body.

"Chayan, look, over there. I think... I think it's a body."

Alassra held out her hand. "It's a body. I wasn't going to tell you."

"You knew?" More disappointment and betrayal.

"I noticed him while you were drinking." She grabbed his

arm and hauled him upright. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go back to the camp. It's not going to be pretty."

"Maybe I haven't fought everyone, but I have seen death, Chayan."

He wrested free and started across the stream ahead of her. Alassra almost smiled: the Bro who'd attacked her three times in the Yuirwood was back.

The corpse had been torn apart by something larger than a bear and more ferocious. Its other arm was missing, along with its heart and the rest of its innards. Alassra laid her hand on Bro's good shoulder.

"Do you recognize him?" she asked very softly.

Bro didn't flinch away. "Lanig. My father knew him. Went looking for him first. He never stopped talking, but Rizcarn trusted him. He was going to dance with Zandilar. He couldn't remember my name; he started calling me Rizcarn's son. At least it wasn't magic or an arrow that killed him, just a bear. I guess he was lucky."

"Right," Alassra agreed, though she read the scene very differently. "I can't carry him alone and you've only got one arm. We'd better go to the camp and tell them what's happened. First you, then this. Maybe we should try to send them home?"

"They won't go. Not unless the full moon comes and goes without Rizcarn leading them to the Sunglade. They believe, Chayan; my father makes them believe. But maybe they'll post an extra watch tonight, if you tell them. You've got weapons and fought the Tuigans; they'll listen to you."

He was more perceptive than Alassra had credited him for. At his age she wouldn't have thought of doubling the watch, wouldn't have understood the delicate balance between weapons and belief.

"What else do you see here, Ebroin, other than a corpse?"

"Other than that? What could be other than that?"

"He's covered in blood—his chest was ripped open and he was gutted—but there's no blood on the ground, none on

the leaves, the trees. The ground's fairly soft. You can see where we walked up from the stream. But there are no other tracks. Dead or alive, Ebroin, how did he get here? And when? I didn't see him when I came to the stream myself. Was I blind while I drank from the stream? Were we both deaf while you rested on the rock?"

Bro lifted his right hand, thought better of it, then scratched his scalp with his left. "Magic? Red Wizards? The Simbul? What's left? What do we have that they'd want? We're just some crazed Cha'Tel'Quessir who want to dance in the moonlight. Killing us won't change anything; Rizcarn's not here." Bro stopped and sighed. "It's because Rizcarn's not here. He took Relkath's protection with him."

Alassra didn't ask about Relkath's protection. There were natural creatures in Faerun that could savage a man this thoroughly, but without blood splatters or other signs of struggle, magic seemed a better explanation: a murder disguised as a mauling and concealed by spellcraft. Any Red Wizard old enough to leave Thay could have cast the spells.

"We'd better get to the camp. You should do the talking, Ebroin, if you're up to it. With or without a sword, you are Rizcarn's son. I just got here today."

Bro couldn't replace Rizcarn in the camp, but the Cha'Tel'Quessir listened as he described what they'd find on the far side of the stream and what it meant.

Yongour called three other names; the four of them headed for the stream. Bro moved to follow. Alassra held him back.

"You've done enough," she assured him. "With two holes in your side, no one expects you to carry Lanig's body uphill."

"Before you were telling me to use my arm more. Lanig was no one to me, but he was there when they pulled the arrow out of me; I owe him. He must've died sometime today. Before or after you got here, I wonder. You who've fought everyone, everywhere. You know about Thayan arrows, maybe you know Thayan spells, too. You've been staring at me since you got here, Chayan. Why? Because I'm still

alive?"

"Let's go somewhere quiet and talk about this, Ebroin."

She reached for his right arm; he wrested away.

"I don't think I should go anywhere with you, alone."

Alassra tried again and caught his wrist. "I didn't put an arrow in you, Ebroin, and I didn't pop Lanig's heart out of his chest. I'll prove it to you, if I have to, but I'd rather you took my word."

"I want proof."

"Not here. Somewhere private."

She led Bro out of the camp, wondering, as she walked, if he'd be any more convinced of her innocence once he did know who she was. Perhaps the best course would be to summon Trovar Halaern, whose thoughts she could catch through the circlet and who could say, with absolute honesty, that they'd been together last night and this morning and nowhere near the camp.

"We'll start with the simple things." Alassra began, still holding Bro's wrist. "I didn't put an arrow in you because I don't have any reason to. I came to this camp because I'd heard about Rizcarn, your father, and what he planned to do in the Sunglade. When I got here, Lanig told me Rizcarn was gone and Rizcarn's son was injured. So I made myself useful, making sure you didn't die—I know you, Ebroin, I know you better than you imagine and I rather like—"

Alassra got no further in her explanation. Bro's right arm—the one she'd been telling him he could move with confidence—slipped around her waist. Any other time, she would have bounced him off the ten nearest trees for impertinence, but sometimes even the queen of Aglarond took the easy way, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him gently before saying:

"You're a handsome young man, Ebroin. It's very easy to stare."

My lady?

Halaern answering her summons.

Never mind. I thought there was a problem, but I've got it under control.

As you wish, my lady.

He was attractive and his wounds were healing. If she were careful . . . but, no, she'd break his heart as she'd broken others, or he'd break hers by growing old. Alassra risked a little magic; Bro found himself yawning and interested only in a nap. Next time she came to the Yuirwood, Alassra swore, there'd definitely be warts on her face, a lot of them, plus crossed eyes, and crooked teeth, with great, dirty gaps between them

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond
Morning, the twenty-third day of Eleasias, The Year of the
Banner (1368DR)

Bro awoke early, wrapped in a woolen blanket. He remembered little of the previous evening, except that he couldn't stop yawning while Lanig's grave was dug and had fallen asleep shortly after sunset.

His wounds didn't hurt, not the cautery burns nor the puncture passage between his ribs. Bro considered the possibility that the Simbul's knife had healed him overnight. The queen hadn't told him it would protect him against poison; he'd had to learn that for himself. Maybe it had healing powers as well.

Perhaps he should have been more careful with her boots. Perhaps he shouldn't have blamed her for Sulalk. Perhaps he wasn't healed at all. Perhaps the lack of pain was proof that the wound had festered, deadening the flesh around it. Perhaps each beat of his heart was pushing fatal poison closer to his brain. Perhaps he should take off his borrowed shirt, unwind the bandages and see for himself.

Bro decided against all of that.

He looked around quickly. His nearest neighbor, still asleep, was a head of long brown hair, half-braided, half-loose, spilling onto another trade blanket. Not Rizcarn, whose hair was raven black. There wasn't a raven hair to be seen in pale light. Rizcarn hadn't returned.

The watch had retired and the camp was stirring. Cha'Tel'Quessir rekindled their fires for breakfast cooking, shook out their clothes, wandered in and out of the bushes, tending their private needs. Bro counted a handful of new faces among them; they numbered forty now, give or take a few. Chayan hadn't been yesterday's only new arrival, though she was the only one he'd noticed.

Thinking of her, Bro pounded his fist against his forehead. Healed or poisoned, he was clearer-headed this morning,

and the memories . . . What had he been thinking of when she led him out of the camp? Had he truly put his arm around her? Tried to kiss her on the lips?

"Gods curse me for a fool," he muttered, knotting his shirt within his fist, until he remembered it was hers and smoothed it out again. "They were digging Lanig's grave and I was thinking ..."

Bro didn't want to say what he'd been thinking, not even in a whisper. The very morning that she died, his mother had chided him for being too shy and awkward around the Sulalk human girls. Time enough, he'd told himself, when he got back to the Yuirwood.

But barely enough: Chayan was practically the first unspoken-for woman he'd met, and he'd made a fool of himself. Cha'Tel'Quessir grew up as fast as their human cousins, then settled into an almost-elven maturity. Bro recalled how shocked he'd been when Shali once told him she was old enough to be Dent's mother. Chayan, who'd fought everywhere with everyone and whose tree-family, SilverBranch, Bro didn't recognize, was almost certainly older than Shali. Age wasn't supposed to be important between men and women in the Yuirwood, but the longer Bro thought about it, the younger and more foolish he felt.

He grabbed the blanket and began folding it, using both arms: he'd sooner die of poison than have Chayan taking care of him a moment longer. It wasn't his blanket anyway; he'd been borrowing blankets or furs each night, as he'd been borrowing everything else since he met up with his father. Two nights ago, he'd borrowed a fur from Lanig. . .

Bro's hands stopped moving. He hadn't known Lanig well. More than the memory of Lanig's corpse and Dent's and Shali's, it was the number of people who were simply gone that set his hands shaking. His world had turned over so many times, and what was he doing? Folding a blanket, as if it mattered whether blankets got folded, whether he was warm and dry when the dew fell.

Rizcarn went around the Yuirwood carving runes into trees and stones so they wouldn't forget. Bro thought it would have been more useful to carve runes into the Cha'Tel'Quessir themselves so he wouldn't forget who he was, where he'd come from, and what he'd left behind. Shali had a tiny scar on her cheek; for his life, Bro couldn't remember if it had been her right cheek or her left.

He took a deep breath that hurt his right-side ribs and the place he called his heart. Then he put another fold in the blanket, because he was alive, not dead, and he'd have to return the blanket with proper gratefulness. When the blanket was neatly folded in eighths, Bro started to stand, and stopped. The blanket in his hands matched the blanket wrapped around his neighbor, and his nighttime neighbor with the long, brown hair was Chayan.

Chayan, wrapping him in her own blankets, taking care of him because he was too young and foolish to take care of himself.

At least she was still asleep. Carefully, quietly, Bro laid the blanket beside her and tiptoed away. Yongour hailed him as he trudged up from the stream. Had he slept well? Was he feeling better? Would he breakfast at Yongour's fire?

Lanig's death and Rizcarn's continued absence had revitalized the Cha'Tel'Quessir. They gathered like tree-family elders at Yongour's fire, sipping tea and gnawing chunks of yesterday's bread. Bro greeted them all by name; they greeted him as Rizcarn's son and asked him when his father would return.

"The question is, should we wait here, or make our way to the Sunglade," Yongour explained. "I measure that the 'Glade's three days from here, walking fast and alone. We're thirty-eight now, and we can only walk as fast as our slowest legs. Some have to forage as well. If we leave now, all of us will get there. If we wait a day, some won't. If we wait more than a day, like as not, Zandilar will dance without us. Did your father tell you which we should do? Walk or wait?"

Bro wanted to laugh. His father hadn't told him anything. Rizcarn didn't trust his son much more than that son trusted him, but Rizcarn had—unintentionally?—left him with the power to bring thirty-eight Cha'Tel'Quessir to the Sunblade or keep them in this camp until it was too late to dance with Zandilar.

"Wait," one of the women said. "Rizcarn's our guide. I've been to the 'Glade a hundred times, and nothing's come of it. If there's to be change in the Yuirwood, Rizcarn must lead us to the Sunblade, no one else."

Another woman spoke up. "Rizcarn called us together. He told us where to go and when to be there. Now he's gone to do other things. If we fail him, we fail the Yuirwood, we fail the Cha'Tel'Quessir. It's time to start walking."

"You see our problem," Yongour advised Bro. "We were evenly divided until we agreed to listen to you. You're his son. The gods' arrow struck you. Another man would have died, but we see you walking. You have their favor, Rizcarn's son. You could lead us."

Bro assumed that Yongour was one of those in favor of marching toward the Sunblade. "There are other things to consider," he began. "Whoever—whatever—killed Lanig is still out there."

"Lanig lost faith after Rizcarn left," the first woman said.

"He was ready to leave. He abandoned Rizcarn; Rizcarn abandoned him." That from the second woman.

Yongour added his opinion: "Lanig's death is another reason to move on. Rizcarn won't come back to a place where he was betrayed."

Bro started to say My father's not a god, but the words stuck in his throat. To the men and women waiting for him to speak, he was no more than a coin tossed to break a tie in a game of odds or evens. Yongour expected him to break it in his favor. And Bro would have, if he'd thought there was something to be gained for the Yuirwood and the Cha'Tel'Quessir in the Sunblade at full moon. After Lanig's

death, Bro didn't believe anything.

All eyes were on Bro, waiting for his decision. Half of them were certain to be disappointed. All of them seemed to feel Lanig had gotten what he deserved. Bro wrapped his hand around the Simbul's knife, but there wasn't any magic involved here.

"What do you think, Rizcarn's son?" Yongour prodded. "Decide for us."

"Wait—" Faces darkened immediately. "Wait for another day, then start walking as fast as we can."

They were satisfied. They were as foolish as he had been with Chayan outside of the camp yesterday, but they were satisfied. Bro walked away by himself.

Chayan was gone. The place where she'd slept, where he'd left the folded blanket, was empty. Bro should have been relieved that he wouldn't have to face her again; he wasn't. He spun around, looking for her distinctive wine-colored shirt and found it striding out of the camp. She had her pack and weapons.

Bro started after her.

The camp, scattered beneath a score of trees, wasn't more than two hundred paces across. Near Sulalk, Bro wouldn't have lost sight of Chayan, but in the Yuirwood she'd vanished well before he'd walked past the last hearth. Chayan was armed to the teeth and gave the impression that she could fight anyone who challenged her. If they came to trouble, Bro knew he'd rely on her, the same as he'd relied on the Simbul. Maybe that was why, despite his shame, he kept looking for footprints, broken twigs, or any other sign that he'd found her trail.

It wasn't long before Bro was as far from the camp as he was from Chayan, and equally lost. He climbed a tree and spotted smoke rising from the camp fires. Climbing down, an errant breeze carried the sounds of what might be conversation.

The forest skills his MightyTree uncles had taught him were

coming back. Bro spotted the faint trail in a few dislodged pebbles and fallen leaves, followed it, and was rewarded when he heard the voices again, clear enough to make out the words.

"There are two main groups, both shadowing the Cha'Tel'Quessir camp. They use magic to conceal themselves. It's not working well, but the camp doesn't suspect they're out there, so it hasn't been a problem for them. The one group thinks it's the only group; the other shadows them and the camp. And there's a third, a solitaire, I think, maybe a companion of some sort. Very hard to track, but I think she went east with Rizcarn. I sent two foresters after her."

A man's voice, speaking the Cha'Tel'Quessir dialect with its proper accent. Not someone from the camp. Bro crept closer, listening for a second voice.

"She? What exactly makes you think the solitaire is a woman? And do you mean with Rizcarn, or pursuing him?"

Bro's heart beat in his throat: the second voice belonged to the woman who'd taken care of him, slept beside him, and assured him she could prove she'd had nothing to do with the arrow. He drew his knife and waited for more, but the voices were silent. A moment passed, ten, then a hundred. Bro hunched closer, aware of the sound dead leaves made beneath his feet no matter how careful he was, and of his pulse pounding in his ears, which was surely the loudest sound in the forest.

From the corner of his right eye, Bro caught a shadow moving in the tree above him. He looked up, saw nothing; heard a sound and before he could ask himself what he'd heard, there was another man's arm locked around his jaw, brutally twisting his neck, and an edge of sharp steel laid against his exposed throat.

"Let it go."

The voice was the voice he'd heard first. Bro let the Simbul's knife fall from his hands. He gasped as he was kneed in the

kidneys. The knife at his neck slid as he fell forward. Bro was sure his throat had been slit. He tried to get a look at his captor before he died.

"Face down, youngster," the man said, planting his foot on Bro's neck.

At least he wasn't bleeding to death, though Bro thought his neck would break when the man bent down to retrieve the Simbul's knife.

"Where'd you get this?"

There was no time to think of a clever lie. "The Simbul gave it to me."

"Did she now?" A firm hand replaced the foot on his neck, then the hand was pressing his wrist into the small of his back. "On your feet." He wrenched the wrist he held and hauled Bro upright.

They started forward with Bro stumbling and certain his arm would snap with every awkward step.

"He says the Simbul gave him a knife," his captor shouted.

They cleared a pine tree and were face to face with Chayan, who scowled when she saw him.

"Oh, Ebroin. I should have guessed you'd follow me. Let him go, Halaern."

Bro was crushed, but smart enough not to argue when Halaern released him. He'd heard the name Halaern before: Trovar Halaern, the Simbul's forester. Turning around to face his captor, he saw the green metal circlet on the man's brow. Bro didn't want to believe that Trovar Halaern, elder of Yuirwood as well as the Simbul's forester, was in league with Red Wizards, but he couldn't think of another explanation.

And he couldn't look at Chayan.

"Ebroin," she said gently. "Ebroin, meet my cousin, Trovar Halaern. Halaern, meet Ebroin of MightyTree."

"The Ebroin of MightyTree—Rizcarn's son?"

Bro nodded glumly, still not looking at either of them.

"Shali's son?" the forester persisted. Bro nodded again.

"Urell's daughter? And Laseli's? Sister of Mirran and Cresil?"

"Yes. Daughter and sister." It wasn't mockery. When Cha'Tel'Quessir met, they exchanged personal names, but when the meeting was important—when a man met an elder for the first time—Cha'Tel'Quessir exchanged lineages until they found a common ancestor. Bro wracked his memory for the proper lineages. So much time had passed since he'd recited them and he wanted so badly not to embarrass himself—again—that the names slipped through his mind's fingers. All but one:

"Eshtrelan's son?" Bro raised his eyes and held his breath.

The forester grinned. "Grandson. Her brother, Strael, went to MightyTree with Dassa."

Dassa had died long before Bro was born. He counted the generations and degrees on his knuckles, the way he'd been taught. "My twice-great-uncle's sister's daughter." He held out his hand.

Halaern seized it. "Well met, cousin. Don't go sneaking up on people when they're having a private conversation."

"He wasn't sneaking, Halaern. Bears make less noise."

Bro could have done without the backhand defense. "I'll leave now."

"No, stay. You're here now," Chayan insisted. "This concerns you."

He stayed and learned that the Thayan wizards had been following him and Rizcarn since the morning they'd picked up Lanig. He learned, too, that the forester and his cousin suspected that Rizcarn was the Cha'Tel'Quessir who'd turned traitor with Thay.

"He's strange," Bro protested. "He's not truly my father, but he'd never work with the Red Wizards. Never."

"It wouldn't be something he chose to do," Chayan explained. "The Red Wizards have a score of spells that can transform a good man into an evil one."

Bro felt sick and dizzy. "We—I've got to find him." He couldn't catch his breath; the trees were turning gray. "Got to stop him."

Halaern caught Bro's arm before he collapsed. "No one's saying that Rizcarn's been turned by the Red Wizards, I only think there's a chance that he's been. We found a corpse a few days ago, a Red Wizard corpse." The forester glanced at Chayan.

"Go ahead. Ebroin has nothing to hide. He told me everything yesterday. He won't be surprised that the Simbul was looking for him."

He was, but tried to hide the reaction—unsuccessfully, to judge from the looks both Chayan and Halaern gave him.

"We found it not all that far from where she said she left you, Ebroin of MightyTree, not all that far from where you met Rizcarn."

"Why me?" Bro asked. "I can almost understand Sulalk, because of Zandilar's Dancer. Dancer's important and never was mine, I understand that now. And the Simbul left Dancer with me. But I gave Dancer to Zandilar days ago. Why the arrow, too? I don't have anything left to give."

Halaern clapped Bro on the back, avoiding his scars. "I wondered about that, Ebroin. It's one of many questions I have for the Simbul, when next I see her."

"She won't answer them if she sees you've still got the knife she gave to Ebroin," Chayan said with a smile.

The forester flipped the knife, testing its balance, examining its steel, before handing it back to Bro. "Did she tell you it's Thayan-made?"

Bro gulped and hesitated before slipping the blade into its sheath. "Should I keep it?"

Halaern nodded. "But be careful who you show it to. With wizards about, it could be easily misunderstood—at least until we get rid of the wizards. It could be done—the getting rid of them, that is—with the Simbul's permission, of course. They're hardly wise in the ways of the Yuirwood, especially where magic's involved, and I don't think they know any more than we do—probably less. None of them speak the Cha'Tel'Quessir dialect. They're spying, but they aren't

learning anything. They're following Rizcarn, like everyone else."

The forester was staring at his cousin again. Bro began to understand that Halaern had sent Chayan into the camp to be his eyes and ears since Halaern, himself, would have been recognized.

"I met her once," Chayan said. "I don't think I'd do anything without her permission, cousin. If she wants to give those Red Wizards more rope, it's not your decision to hang them early."

"Of course not. I won't do anything without her word. But I don't like it, not one bit. Thayan wizards don't belong here."

Bro agreed. "It's our forest. The Red Wizards are our enemies, too. The Simbul would never know if I told Yongour and the others—"

The forester held up his hand. "Don't even think about it, Ebroin."

"The Simbul doesn't know everything. She's not always right. Everyone's dead in Sulalk because of her." Bro could almost feel Chayan and Halaern wishing he would be quiet. They were looking at each other, not at him. "I'm not blaming her, not anymore, but the Simbul's not here, we are, and so are the Red Wizards."

"He has a point, cousin," Trovar Halaern said; Bro felt himself grow a handspan in his own estimation. "My lady, the Simbul, is not here, is she?"

Chayan looked very uncomfortable.

Bro pressed his luck. "More Cha'Tel'Quessir could be killed, and not just me. What about Lanig? What happened to him? Chayan said that was magic, too."

"Lanig?" the forester asked.

"Cha'Tel'Quessir," Chayan said quickly. "Ebroin and I found his body yesterday across the camp stream. Looked as if he'd been torn apart by something large, but my best guess is magic."

"Not Red Wizard spells, cousin. There were no wizards near

the camp yesterday."

"You're certain? The solitaire didn't double back?"

"There were no wizards near the camp yesterday, cousin. If a man died by spellcraft yesterday, something else killed him, something far more subtle than any Thayan wizard, if neither you nor I knew about it until after it happened."

It was Chayan's turn to stare and the forester's to look uncomfortable. Bro had a suggestion:

"Why don't you come to the camp? Rizcarn's not there and they need an elder, especially with Red Wizards and worse all around us."

"I serve the Simbul, Ebroin, and she wants me in the forest for now. I'll send you back with Chayan. The two of you together should be equal to an elder. I'll take my leave of you now, cousin and friend. I'm sure your day will be more interesting than mine."

The elder of YuirWood bowed, took two steps into the forest and simply vanished. Bro couldn't contain his astonishment. His jaw dropped and he'd swear he heard Chayan laughing, though her lips hadn't moved.

"You seem to have recovered fully from your misadventures."

"The holes hurt a little, the cautery burns itch a bit. I—I want to apologize for the way I was yesterday. I think, maybe ... I hope it was poison."

"I could check: take off your shirt and the bandages, see if everything's healed."

She was teasing him again, seeming to say one thing while meaning another. Bro kept his shirt laces where they were.

"We should go back to the camp."

"Has something happened? Aren't they still debating whether to walk or wait?"

"I told them to wait until tomorrow, then start walking."

"Clever of you, Ebroin. You have another day to finish healing. You don't like the Simbul much, do you?"

"I said I'd stopped blaming her. Maybe it wasn't her fault or mine that everyone died. I wish it never happened. I wish a

lot of things never happened."

"Everyone does. Me, my cousin, even the Simbul herself. I could wish you hadn't fallen asleep last night."

Bro fought a blush and won. "There're Red Wizards all around us, and whatever killed Lanig."

"I'll keep one hand on my spear, Ebroin. That way, we'll be evenly matched."

If he'd had the sense Great Corellon gave a lowly ant, Bro would have started walking back to the camp, but he didn't, not even when Chayan left her spear right where it was, leaning against a tree.

He was pleased with himself later, when they did return, hand in hand, to the camp. At least until he saw a Cha'Tel'Quessir with raven hair. Rizcarn hailed him as soon as he was inside the camp.

"This isn't right," Bro whispered to the woman at his side. "If he went to MightyTree, he wouldn't be there yet. He shouldn't be back."

Chayan released his hand and pushed him slightly forward.

"Do what you must, Ebroin. I've still got my hand on my spear and an eye for your back."

A spear, Bro thought, wouldn't be much use against his father, but he didn't tell brash Chayan that. He tried to hold onto her confidence, instead, when he returned Rizcarn's open-armed greeting. Rizcarn offered concern for Bro's health and joy for his recovery—all the things that had been missing between them. They came too late. Bro suspected affection now as much as he'd suspected the lack if it earlier. He asked about MightyTree. Rizcarn insisted he'd walked day and night.

"Urell wept when I told him about the dirt-eater village. He wishes you well, Ebroin, and says you must come to MightyTree when you're well. He gave me this."

Rizcarn produced a carved black bead. Bro stood still, thinking hard, trying to decide what to believe, while his father added Shali's death-bead to the others on his

talisman string and retied them around his neck.

"I sang for her at MightyTree last night, but we'll sing again, tonight, right here, until our hearts break."

There was a catch in Rizcarn's voice, tears on his cheeks, but Bro flinched when Rizcarn embraced him again. Chayan caught his eye. She brandished her spear and Bro followed his father to the center of the camp where a fire burned and a jug of honey wine was waiting.

23

Thazalhar, in eastern Thay

Afternoon, the twenty-third day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

"Watch closely," Lauzoril told his daughter. "Bubbles have begun to form at the bottom of the bowl. The water will boil soon, just as it does in the kitchen. I rub the mustard oil on my fingertips, then I place my fingertips on the water very, very carefully. Look close: the water rises up to meet my fingers. The oil spreads across the surface without breaking it."

Mimuay scrunched down on the stool she was under strict orders not to leave. Her eyes were level with the bowl rim.

"Isn't it hot, Poppa? Doesn't it hurt?"

"Of course. Not all spells hurt when I cast them, but many do. If you wish to be a wizard—especially if you wish to be a necromancer—you must learn to ignore discomfort. Now, I say the catalyzing word—Envision—and lift my fingers."

Mimuay gasped as the mustard oil became a bronze sheen on the water. "It's a mirror!"

"Not yet. It reflects nothing." The Zulkir of Enchantment held his hand over the bowl to prove his point. "I must tell it what to reflect, and quickly, or the magic will fade. Several years ago, I sent a gift to a queen. I gave it a name. Now I want to know what's become of it, so I call its name: Kemzali."

The bronze oil dulled. His daughter sighed with disappointment.

"It takes time, Mimuay. Kemzali is far away."

Usually the zulkir made contact with the knife by mental exercise, but today he was teaching his daughter the most important spell she'd ever learn: the means by which she'd be able to detect the presence of magic. He had to cast spells a rank beginner would be able to detect, which meant his old scrying bowl and burned fingers.

"When did you learn to Envision, Poppa? Were you younger than me?"

He'd given up trying to discourage his daughter and took pride in her questions, her persistence. "Much younger. I told you: I grew up among wizards, not in a home with family around me. My life was learning spells."

"Since I'm starting older, will I ever be as good a wizard as you?"

"Casting Envision spells when I was four didn't make me a good wizard."

She thought hard for a moment. Scowl lines were already forming on her forehead. Lauzoril waited for the next question.

"Were you happy growing up among wizards, without a family?"

Which were never the questions he expected, but he'd committed himself to answering them all, and honestly. "I never thought about it. The wizards taught me. I did what they told me to do." Until he was knowledgeable enough to rebel; then they'd thrown him out of the academy, as every other Red Wizard got thrown out at the end of his education.

"I'm glad you're teaching me, Poppa; not someone else."

"So am I, Mimuay. Now watch the bowl."

Since the Convocation, Lauzoril had kept closer track of the knife that he'd sent to Aglarond's queen. He was certain it was no longer in her possession. Even allowing for the confounded Yuirwood, it had become too easy to trigger its scrying properties without arousing any opposition. The zulkir assumed the Simbul had given it to someone not a wizard. He was disappointed, of course. Although it had

never provided him with special insights into the witch-queen's character, he'd enjoyed spying on her and the periodic sense that she returned the favor. It was a sense he had not had in recent days.

No zulkir wasted his time worrying about Aglarond's witch-queen, though Lauzoril had asked himself whether his lack of subtle contact with her had played a part in his decision not to race off to the Yuirwood after the Convocation. Mythrell'aa had gone west, or so Thrul's spy master informed him: by herself, with only a body servant beside her. And Aznar Thrul supported two bands of wizards in the Aglarond forest—also according to the spy master: One that Thrul knew about and another one that he thought belonged to Lady Illusion.

The spy master then asked Lauzoril to pay for rare reagents that would, she assured him, insure that the plums fell in Enchantment's basket, not Illusion nor Invocation's. Lauzoril had balked and ended his never-firm association with the nameless spy master.

Within Thay, Lauzoril had no qualms about pursuing his rivalries with Thrul and the other zulkirs, but if the debacle at Gauros Gorge had accomplished nothing else, it had convinced him that personal rivalries should never stretch across Thay's borders. If the zulkirs couldn't work together to conquer Aglarond and Rashemen, then they should stay home until they could. His conscience, however, did not compel him to alert Aznar Thrul to the traitor coiled close to his heart.

In the depths of his mind Lauzoril knew the spy master's revelations were only part of his reasoning: He didn't have the stomach for all-out bloody war whether in Thay or Aglarond, and he didn't have the steel ambition to grind his rivals into dust. He'd learned the first at Gauros Gorge and the second at the recent Convocation. When the balance of Thayan power slewed between Aznar Thrul and Szass Tam, Lauzoril had seen the way, with the spy master's help, to set

himself above his peers. If he'd taken that first step, though, he could never rest again in Thazalhar or teach his daughter the ways of magic.

Were you happy? Mimuay had asked. Lauzoril had the power of wealth, the power of enchantment, but she made him happy, Thazalhar made him happy. He'd come home after the Convocation and left Aglarond for those who didn't know better.

Mimuay interrupted her father's introspection: "Look, Poppa, it's gone all black."

"Kemzali is a knife in a sheath. We can't see anything unless we can persuade someone to take it out."

Someone whose mind Lauzoril touched with a powerful, subtle spell, implanting a desire to be alone, a desire to examine the knife closely. He would have resorted to the scrying bowl eventually; there was no other way to see the knife's new owner.

After several moments, smears of color stretched across the bowl's oily surface.

"Is that all, Poppa? What can anyone learn from that?"

"That Kemzali's owner is alive and has dark hair," the zulkir informed her sharply, but he held his hands over the bowl. Scrying inside Aglarond was always chancy; the Yuirwood, between Thay and the coastal cities, threw a pall of interference in the path of every spell. But sometimes a wizard got lucky. Lauzoril closed his eyes and shaped the air above the bowl.

"Poppa! Poppa, look! What kind of person is that?"

Lauzoril looked. The mustard oil's bronze sheen colored the images it reflected, but Lauzoril knew the Yuirwood type and knew the knife's new owner looked very much the way he and Mimuay saw him, with golden-green skin and eyes, and hair that was black, or very nearly so.

"Is he a man?"

"A man, yes. A young man, but not human."

There were goblins, gnolls, and orcs aplenty in Thay. Lauzoril

kept a few such slaves himself to do the meanest estate work. Elves, however, were rare, a few drow kept hidden in the cities. As a race—an inferior race—they'd sooner die than serve a Thayan master. The only elves his daughters had ever seen were painted in the picture books he brought home for their mother. Those painted elves were full-blooded; the youth to whom the Simbul had given Lauzoril's enchanted knife was neither human, nor elf. In Thay, such mongrels were not kept, not even for slavery.

"What is he, then, Poppa? Not an elf?"

"A half-elf, Mimuay. Kemzali is in Aglarond and Aglarond is full of half-elves. They call themselves the chattel-kessir."

Of necessity, Red Wizards learned the more common goblin-kin languages. Lauzoril could speak fluently with his goblin slaves. Some wizards learned elvish, too; Lauzoril refused, on principle. He mispronounced the few words he did know, turning them, without second thought, into slurs. A mistake. Mimuay, who knew nothing of elven arrogance or condescension, sat back on her stool, blinking. She never heard coarse, cursing language, not from her father.

"They're all thieves and blackhearts," Lauzoril continued clumsily. "This one probably stole Kemzali from the—" He couldn't finish the sentence. The Simbul had to have given the knife to this mongrel or the youth wouldn't be alive with it in his hands. He wondered why.

"If he's a half-elf, Poppa, what's his other half? Did he have half-elves for his parents, or is he like a mule with a horse and a donkey for his momma and poppa?"

"Such questions!"

Half-breeds occurred whenever humans consorted with elves, a living badge of shame. Mules didn't breed, but human-elf mongrels did. Lauzoril had heard that the Aglarondan mongrels bred true in the Yuirwood, but elsewhere in Faerun, the mongrels reverted to ancestral type. By rumor, every human Aglarondan had a mongrel lurking in his pedigree.

Including Aglarond's queen? Aglarond had been ruled by mongrels before Thay was founded. Humans—suspect humans—had claimed its throne only within the last few generations. The Simbul appeared human, but in a hundred years, her appearance never changed. Red Wizards cribbed a sort of immortality with spells and potions. The Simbul, a mighty wizard, could have done the same—or, perhaps, she wasn't quite human.

And the mongrel to whom she'd given his knife? What was the youth to her? He stood in the Yuirwood—there were trees visible behind him—yet he wore a well-made shirt. Not the sort of garment Lauzoril expected to see in the middle of a forest, though, in truth, this was the first time he'd successfully envisioned the Yuirwood. He had only his prejudices to guide his assumptions.

The scrying image blurred. The mongrel youth had examined his knife and, finding nothing unusual about it, was returning it to its sheath. Lauzoril could have intervened, pricked the youth's thoughts and kept him staring at the blade, but sooner or later even a kobold would guess that something affected his thoughts.

"I think his momma was an elf," Mimuay announced.

The zulkir disagreed, but asked: "Why do you think that?"

"I could feel his thoughts. They were tangled around his momma and very sad. He's alone. He's frightened, too. Someone's tried to kill him, Poppa. A wizard. A Red Wizard."

Lauzoril had punched his compulsions into the mongrel's mind, but he hadn't perceived anything in return—blame the damned Yuirwood. It was inconceivable that his daughter, a mere witness to his spellcasting had perceived what he could not. Mummy's imagination, fired by Wenne's picture books and his own admissions, had taken over. A little imagination was useful for a wizard; too much was dangerous. His mentors had beaten him into submission; he'd have to find another way to curb his daughter's.

"A Red Wizard? Are you sure, Mimuay? You began by saying

his mother was an elf, now you say a Thayan wizard has tried to kill him. Are you very sure?"

She hesitated. "I couldn't understand him, Poppa, not the way I understand Ferrin—"

Her dear, dead friend Ferrin, for whom Lauzoril had searched without success.

"I had to fill in the spaces between his thoughts. He thought of his momma and her ears were pointed, like an elf's. I saw them sticking through her brown hair. She has a spear, Poppa. Do elf-mommamas always carry spears? When he thinks of her, he thinks of Red Wizards—" Mimuay stared at her hands, nervous and ashamed. "There's death—ugly death—when he thinks of Red Wizards, Poppa. He's afraid and he's angry, too; he hates them . . . you . . . us."

Lauzoril measured his next words carefully. If Mimuay hadn't perceived the mongrel's thoughts, from where was she getting these notions? "Aglarond is Thay's enemy. Where there are enemies, there is hate and fear; it cannot be avoided. In western Thay, near Aglarond, little girls fear Aglarond and learn to hate the Aglarondan queen."

"The Simbul?"

He swallowed hard. "Where did you learn that name, Mimuay?"

"From the boy in the mirror, Poppa. In the space between his momma and the Red Wizards is a silver-haired woman he calls the Simbul."

"We've done enough for today, Mimuay."

"I haven't done anything, Poppa. I've just watched. You're angry with me: you don't believe me. You think I'm telling stories. I'm not, Poppa; I wouldn't lie to you, not ever."

There was fear in his daughter's voice. She was too old to become a Red Wizard. By the time he was old enough to wonder about the truth, he'd killed a fellow enchanter outright and driven two others to madness and death. His choices had been made before his eyes had opened. But if he wouldn't teach Mimuay the way he'd been taught, how

would he teach her? Was there any way to keep her fear of him from becoming hate?

No way, Master, Shazzelurt, Lauzoril's enchanted knife, sensed his thoughts, offered its advice. Kill her now, Master. Give her to me.

The zulkir quenched the knife's spirit and lifted Mimuay down from the stool. He held her in his arms, rocking her gently. Her neck fit easily between the thumb and fingers of his hand. Lauzoril knew ways to kill that owed nothing to spells or magic; she wouldn't suffer. "I believe you, Mimuay." He rubbed the hard lump at the base of her neck until her shoulders relaxed. "You'll become a good wizard." A bit of irony there: What did a zulkir know about the training of a righteous wizard? "You learn quickly, and I have to think about what I'm going to teach you next."

She wriggled in his arms, stared at him with frightening trust. "Can we protect the boy in the mirror from his enemies?"

Lauzoril thought of Mythrell'aa headed for the Yuirwood and all the stories Thrul's spy master had told him about massacres and awakening powers. If even half were true . . .

"No, my dear."

"Not even with Kemzali? His thoughts are sad, Poppa, like Ferrin's. I don't want him to die. He's not our enemy."

Ferrin again. Lauzoril stroked his daughter's hair and said nothing.

* * * * *

It was nearing sunset when Lauzoril went to his stable. He sent a straw man walking across the Thazalhar hills. From the stables he went to the hen-coop where he stunned two of the fattest birds and carried them to the crypt.

The peaceful world the Zulkir of Enchantment had made for himself in Thazalhar had crumbled. Mimuay's face haunted him. The mongrel haunted him. The damned witch-queen of Aglarond haunted him. His delicately balanced decision to let Mythrell'aa, Aznar Thrul, and Thrul's spy master play

their bloody games without him had shattered into weak-willed excuses.

For years he'd been subject to fits of melancholy—the enchanter temperament, some called it; this was different. Lauzoril suspected his thoughts were not entirely his own—the enchanter enchanted. He suspected his beloved daughter, Mimuay; he suspected his daughter's mysterious friend: Ferrin.

Gweltaz and Chazsinal roused as Lauzoril unlocked the door at the bottom of the crypt stairs. Their bandages shimmered. Dead eyes followed the hens he held upside down.

"He brings us supper. Living supper," Chazsinal crooned.

"Ignore him. He wants something. Birds are not enough when a mighty zulkir wants. Let him bring us red meat. Living meat, dripping with blood." Gweltaz closed his eyes.

"Feed on your dreams, Grandfather," Lauzoril advised.

The hens had recovered their wits—such as hens' wits were—and struggled in his hand. The Zulkir of Enchantment could charm most lesser creatures into obedience, but not hens or sheep. He closed the door and released one hen. Unable to escape, its presence, alive and frantic, would madden Gweltaz. Lauzoril held the other above his father's linen-wrapped head and with a knife—not Shazzelurt—slit the bird's throat. Blood pulsed onto the linen and disappeared. When the bird had bled out, he dropped the carcass in Chazsinal's lap. His father began to feed, the suckling sounds obscured by the other hen's squawks.

"How important can a thing be, Grandson, if you're willing to entrust it to a fool?"

Lauzoril settled in his chair behind the table. "Important enough that I will not entrust it to one who opposes me at every turn."

"I do not oppose you, Grandson. I test you. What else can a patriarch do?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Someone dead."

"Very dead."

"Szass Tam," Chazsinal hissed, irrelevant as always, now that Lauzoril had Gweltaz's interest.

The zulkir pursued the hen into a corner, stunned it as before, and held it above his Grandfather's chair. A luminous golden stalk rose to Lauzoril's hand. It engulfed the feebly struggling bird and drew it whole within the linen bandages. Gweltaz was the more potent, more inventive of the pair. The zulkir returned to his chair and waited.

"Who do you seek?"

"A name. Ferrin."

"One of us?"

"Possibly. He's dead, that's all I know for sure. He might have died when we fought the Mulhorandi. He has achieved influence within the estate."

Gweltaz made a sound like a purring cat. "Release me. I will find him and bring him here."

Lauzoril made a three-fingered gesture. The golden light around his grandfather's linen flickered twice and was gone.

"Send me, too, son. I know where to look for cowards."

Another three-fingered gesture and Chazsinal was gone as well. Then Lauzoril waited, alone in the dark crypt, while his hungry ancestors hounded one of their own. He thought about Mimuay, about Wenne and his second daughter, Nyasia. How much longer could he keep them safely hidden in Thazalhar? How much longer should he try? Should he go to Aglarond's Yuirwood in search of power? In his heart, Lauzoril didn't believe Mythrell'aa was the Simbul's equal. Certainly Aznar Thrul's spies and his spy master were no threat to the witch-queen. The Simbul could take care of herself, her realm, and a mongrel boy, if she chose to.

So, why did he want to go? Why did he hope his ancestors couldn't find Ferrin or, in finding Ferrin, proved that the dead spirit had nothing to do with Mimuay's vision or his own disturbed thinking? In the end, how much was his own curiosity about Aglarond's mighty, Red-Wizard-killing

queen? How much was his own yearning to be the hero for his daughter as he had once been the hero for Wenne?

The zulkir had not resolved anything in his mind when a glow returned to Chazsinal's chair.

"Oh, my son," the dead necromancer moaned. "Oh, my son, it is a terrible thing that you've done."

"That I've done? To send you off in search of a haunt named Ferrin?"

"Your daughter, Lauzoril. You're teaching your daughter and you haven't set the mark on her heart!"

Before Lauzoril could extract anything further from his distraught father, light swirled around Gweltaz's linen and, with it, the pale and shrunken spirit of a man. The zulkir expected the spirit of a man his own age or older, cunning, wise, and cruel who'd sensed Mimuay's talent, then exploited it for his own purposes. What he got was an apprentice, no older than his daughter, who dropped to his insubstantial knees.

"Mercy, my lord, mercy, I beg you! I would never harm her or you."

"He lies," Gweltaz hissed. "He spies on us. He pursues your precious daughter, mighty zulkir, and fills her silly head with our secrets." He spoke a necromantic word and Ferrin's spirit writhed on the crypt floor.

"How did you find her?" Lauzoril demanded.

Locked in Gweltaz's torment, the spirit couldn't answer.

"Release him."

"He lies, Grandson. He has corrupted your innocent. What more do you need? Let me have him."

If Gweltaz had been a little less eager. If Gweltaz had not despised Mimuay as female and weak. If Gweltaz hadn't been known to lie more often than not himself. "Release him, Grandfather, or I'll do it for you."

Tiny flames sprouted from the zulkir's fingers: un-subtle reminders of the damage fire could do to linen bandages. Gweltaz retreated. Lauzoril repeated his question to Ferrin.

"My lord, in the spring, Mimuay found my bones, my skull, and called me back—"

"Lies!" Gweltaz shouted. "We scour the bones Thazalhar heaves up each spring. He is from outside, Lauzoril. He is from Szass Tam! And you teaching her wizardry, Lauzoril? And she will teach your secrets to Szass Tam!"

The necromancer surged forward, enveloping Ferrin's far weaker spirit. Again, Lauzoril called on fire to separate them.

"She has a gift, my lord," Ferrin said. "She called me, but she could call others." By which Ferrin clearly meant the likes of Gweltaz and Chazsinal. "I told her to go to you. That is all I did."

"Lies! Lies! The child is as foolish as her idiot mother."

Lauzoril considered his grandfather, the spirit Mimuay had called out of an ancient grave and the talent still trapped in Wenne's clever, crippled mind. "How long have you been able to hear her, Grandfather?"

The zulkir got his answer, but not from the dead. The wards at the top of the crypt stairway rang like bells, then fell ominously silent.

Ferrin rose from the floor. "Send her away, my lord. You can, my lord. She is still innocent, my lord. Don't let her come down here!"

Ferrin saved himself with that plea, but Lauzoril wouldn't charm his daughter. He dissolved his wards instead before they did the job they were meant to do and destroyed her.

"Mindless fool!" Gweltaz roared just before Mimuay came through the crypt door.

In the moment of confusion, Gweltaz surrounded Ferrin, subsuming the apprentice's essence. Mimuay let out a scream that began as terror and ended as rage. Lauzoril grabbed her as she started for Gweltaz. His daughter called her friend's name and fought frantically with heels, elbows, and fingernails that raised bloody welts on her father's arms. Then she stopped and became perfectly still. "He's gone. Ferrin's gone."

Lauzoril said a single word in Mulhorandi, the language of the Red Wizards' oldest, darkest magic. He held Mimuay tight, but did not cover her eyes, letting her witness the slow gathering of pinpoint sparks in the center of the crypt. The necromancers pleaded; Lauzoril would have saved Chazsinal—he'd done nothing to deserve the final death, but futility and waste had been the hallmarks of his father's existence; it was appropriate that they were present when the sparks expanded into an ember sphere that descended on the undead necromancers, consuming every part of them before extinguishing themselves.

"I regret Ferrin," Lauzoril said when he and Mimuay were together in the dark.

His hands were shaking as he pushed his daughter away and made light. Despite the shaking, he was strangely calm. Fifteen years ago, before he brought his father and grandfather to Thazalhar, Lauzoril had memorized the ancient spell that could destroy them. He'd kept it primed all these years. The emptiness in his mind, in the crypt, didn't seem quite real.

"Who were they?" Mimuay asked, calm and dry-eyed.

"Your grandfather and great-grandfather—my father and grandfather. Necromancers. I sent them after Ferrin. He hid from me. You hid him from me."

"He was afraid of you. I kept him in my room."

Lauzoril nodded and rubbed his chin. "Do you understand what happened here? Why your friend is gone?"

"You destroyed him, Poppa."

"No, Mimuay," Lauzoril's voice was very soft, very angry. "I did not; I had decided he was no harm to you or me. Gweltaz, my grandfather, destroyed Ferrin—subsumed him because my concentration faltered and he was able to move freely. My concentration faltered because you battered at my wards and I had a choice: to send you away with magic or dissolve the wards. I'd given you my word I would never touch you with magic. You were where you should not have

been, doing what you should not have done. But I kept my word to you. Now do you understand what happened?"

She said nothing, did nothing except return her father's stare. Lauzoril couldn't untangle her thoughts—not without resorting to spellcraft. He could scarcely untangle his own, strung as they were between rage and sorrow.

"It's late," he said when she had said nothing for longer than he could bear listening. He cast the light as a sphere and sent it toward the door. "We'll talk again later. Not tomorrow or the day after. I'm leaving Thazalhar, Mimuay."

"I understand, Poppa."

And she might, but Lauzoril didn't understand her. "I'll be back, Mimuay. I'm going to the Yuirwood, in Aglarond."

24

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Afternoon and evening, the twenty-third day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

With Rizcarn's return, word had spread among the Cha'Tel'Quessir that they'd be walking tomorrow, the next day, and the day after that. Daytime rest would be infrequent. Nighttime camp would be late and cold. If folk wanted journey bread, they had the rest of day and a night to grind their flour and bake it. A lucky few, the men and women who'd known Rizcarn from before, gathered in the center of the camp to mourn Shali of MightyTree, the mother of Rizcarn's son. Everyone else, including Chayan of SilverBranch, found a flatish stone and a roundish one, then got down on their knees and began to grind.

Grinding took the most strength, and the least talent. Mixing flour, leavening, and water, while not unlike combining the reagents for a spell, required a better understanding of cookery than Alassra had bothered to acquire over the centuries, and kneading dough was a mystery she'd never unravelled. So she ground grain throughout the afternoon: wheat and oats from the packs of Cha'Tel'Quessir who traded with farmers beyond the Yuirwood, wild rice and millet other

families grew in forest clearings, and ripe nuts that could be knocked loose from nearby trees.

The Simbul ground whatever they set in front of her until her back muscles screamed. In private, she healed herself, then she ground more, wondering how the men and women who didn't have a pouchful of magic kept themselves fed. Her hands were another matter. Scraping them bloody as she ground the grain between her two stones was inevitable, and healing them was impossible if she wanted to maintain her disguise.

By sundown, when the grinding ceased, there was a little bit of Aglarond's queen in every loaf. She ate her supper—passing on the fresh bread—alone at the edge of the camp, nursing sore fingers, and in a foul mood. Her frayed temper owed more to the weather than her raw knuckles. The wind had shifted to the east—from Thay— hot, heavy, and thick, plastering Alassra's sweaty skin with bitter dust. It did take a weather-witch to know a storm was coming.

The moon and stars hid behind a stifling cloud blanket. A few Cha'Tel'Quessir kept their fires burning. The rest let the embers die once the bread was baked. Like Alassra, they sat, alone and still, watching the mourners at the center of the camp.

The Simbul pricked her finger with her drow sister's knife, adding elven sight to her mage senses. She didn't like what the night revealed. A silver-green aura flickered around Bro's father. She expected to see that aura around the ancient trees and mossy menhirs that were the source of the Yuirwood's protection. She'd never seen it cast by a man—if Rizcarn was a man. Short of seizing him by the shoulders and subjecting him to a wizard's interrogation, the Simbul couldn't decide what manner of creature Bro's father had become.

He was alive. She'd ascertained that with spells from a distance and by subjecting Bro to an examination of his healed wounds that, not coincidentally, allowed her to get

close to Rizcarn. If the man had ever been dead, he'd been brought back a long time ago and brought back by a master. Still, Rizcarn wasn't like any other living man she'd met. Their eyes had met and, fearing he had the power to see through her Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise, the Simbul had looked away first.

Alassra couldn't describe what she'd seen and felt without resorting to the word Stiwelen had used in Everlund: wild. The longer she watched from her safe distance at the camp perimeter, the more she appreciated the Moon elf's judgment. There was a wildness in the Yuirwood, a wildness in Rizcarn himself, a quality that couldn't be measured by the civilized words for right or wrong, good or evil.

As the defender of a small pocket of civilization, Alassra considered putting a stop to Rizcarn and his Cha'Tel'Quessir, but as the Simbul she nurtured a similar wildness close to her heart; she waited and watched.

Rizcarn's arms wove the air as he sang a courtship song he must have once sung to Shali. The other Cha'Tel'Quessir in the circle around him couldn't see the silver-green aura, but they felt the magic—especially Bro, oblivious to the sweat streaming down his face, swaying in rhythm with his father's arms as he sang the chorus.

Of course, there was another explanation for the youth's exuberance. Alassra had lost count of the jugs and skins of honey wine the Cha'Tel'Quessir had passed around their circle. Several of the mourners would sleep where they sat. Not Rizcarn; the aura allowed him to drink to no effect.

And not Bro. Alassra herself had seen to that when she examined his wounds. The youth was living fast tonight, thanks to her spellcraft: a self-indulgent, but useful, variation on the warrior's haste spell left Bro's bones moving at an unexceptional speed while his gut digested honey wine at a prodigious rate. He was steady on his feet when he started walking toward the bushes.

Alassra followed him at a discrete distance. Spells

notwithstanding, Bro wasn't as sober as he thought he was, and she needed to remind him—with a pinch of salt and a strand of his hair—that he was thirsty and needed water before returning to the mourners' circle. She trailed him to the stream where they'd found Lanig's body and watched, smiling, as he not only drank his fill, but stripped to the waist and sluiced off the sweat.

Bro headed back to the camp, shirt sleeves tied around his waist, with Alassra keeping a quiet distance behind him. She heard a twig break, loudly and not by accident. Bro finished the journey alone.

"Storm's coming," Halaern said from the shadows.

"The question is, when will it get here. The wind's died, but the storm's still in the air. I wonder what's holding it there? Red Wizard magic? The wind's from their quarter."

"The wind," Halaern agreed. Where weather was concerned, he was the expert. "But not the storm. The storm's here, my lady. The Yuirwood doesn't like all this magic."

"All this magic? If the storm's not from the Red Wizards, what magic is there? The Cha'Tel'Quessir baking bread? Rizcarn?"

Halaern shrugged. "Rizcarn and the Sunblade are part of the Yuirwood, but the Yuirwood has many trees. They are not all the same."

When it suited them, the Cha'Tel'Quessir could be as oblique as any Tel'Quessir. The Simbul could mimic their features, but never their thoughts. Her forester had known Rizcarn; the images she'd gleaned from his memories were more accurate than those she'd gleaned from Bro. How well had they known each other? What would Rizcarn say if Trovar Halaern, elder of Yuirwood, walked into his camp, or did he already know he had the Simbul's forester as an outrider? If Halaern wanted to get a message into or out of the camp, Alassra didn't doubt he could do it and right in front of her eyes.

Alassra's thoughts were always her own, but the silence

belonged to both her and Halaern.

"My queen, I serve you as I serve the forest. I would not wish to lose your trust, but there are things I cannot explain."

He stood farther away than usual, with more reserve, less affection, calling her his queen rather than his friend. She could guess why.

"Have I lost yours, dear friend? Do you watch me do what you would rather I did not?"

His eyes hardened; she'd touched a nerve. "Ebroin is young. His eyes are open, but he's never seen."

"Until today?"

"I beg you, my lady, have a care for him. You are his first. For him, there will be consequences."

Halaern knew the consequences because he'd lived them. Alassra suffered a guilty twinge for a situation she did not consider her fault, or at least not entirely her fault. "I do not encourage him, Halaern; I did not encourage you. I offered friendship, and it was freely taken. I offered laughter, and that was taken, too. If Ebroin knew who Chayan SilverBranch was, he'd run in the other direction."

"You mistake the value of your friendship and laughter, my lady, and you are never less than beautiful."

"Would you have me masquerade as a sour-tempered crone?"

"No," Halaern shook his head. "I have seen you disguised many times. Whether you are a blackbird or a dead tree, it makes no difference to my heart. I share you with all Faerun and, as the gods will, I will grow old and die before you. I ask only that you have a care for Ebroin."

There were no words to deny the truth. "Ebroin knows a woman named Chayan of SilverBranch. They will have a few days together, a week, perhaps. Then Chayan will vanish. I hope he remembers Chayan fondly, but if she breaks his heart, she will have done it only once and, if she does, may I presume there will be someone older and wiser nearby to commiserate with him?"

"He won't be alone. But I did not come to argue or talk about Ebroin."

"I was hoping you'd come to tell me where Rizcarn's been these last two days. Did he have time to get to MightyTree and back as he claims?"

The forester shook his head. "Not walking. If he used magic, though, anything is possible. The Rizcarn I knew was no druid, but the Rizcarn I knew isn't sitting in that camp up there. My forester is still on her way to MightyTree. When she returns we'll know more. Just as well, though, that Rizcarn has returned and the Cha'Tel'Quessir will walk tomorrow. The Red Wizards are restless in their cold camps. They're tired of hiding and seeing what we intend them to see; they've started exploring. They can scarcely follow a trail that's blazed with fire crystals, yet eventually they'll blunder into each other and I do not think that is anything we want to see in the Yuirwood."

Alassra nodded. "You think right. What of the solitaire following Rizcarn?"

"The solitaire didn't follow Rizcarn, my lady," Halaern's expression became one of pain and distress. "They were never seen on any of the known paths. When Rizcarn arrived earlier, I backtracked his trail myself. His footprints were clear on the stream banks, but a little further, they were gone. Rizcarn could do that, but not the solitaire. The solitaire was city-bred, like the rest of the Red Wizards. Even with magic they can't conceal themselves, and there was no sense of Thayan magic."

The Simbul's ageless heart skipped a beat, not because the solitary wizard had disappeared: after the corpse she and her sister had found, she was not surprised that Rizcarn had returned alone. Halaern's reticence—telling her about the solitaire only after she asked the necessary question—troubled her. "I would have liked to know that first, Halaern. Red Wizards gone missing in the Yuirwood interests me more than the weather."

"I know," he said, his own concern evident in his soft, flat tone. "It took me much longer to backtrack Rizcarn's trail, as well. Rizcarn knows the Yuirwood, my lady, and makes full use of his knowledge. He made certain no one—no Cha'Tel'Quessir—would know which way he'd come. That was what I meant to tell you when I saw you following Ebroin to the stream just now. What I said, it is all true, but it wasn't what I meant to say. When I saw you together, I became foolish. The weather. A hanging storm brings out the worst in a man. It's brought out the worst in me. It won't happen again."

"You judge yourself too harshly, Halaern, and make promises you may not keep. You told me the storm was the Yuirwood's way of defending itself. You implied, very carefully, dear friend, that someone is keeping that storm up in the clouds. Are you also implying that someone could sense a moment of weakness and use it to distract you?"

Halaern gave the matter a moment's thought. "Not Rizcarn, my lady. He can hide in the forest, that's all, and he has charmed those who follow him, but Rizcarn always claimed to serve Relkath of the Infinite Branches."

"The Old Man of the Yuirwood."

"I have never heard Relkath called that, my lady, but Relkath—I do not think it is wise to awaken the old ones. I never have. As a god, Relkath is like the weather, the only thing a man knows for certain is that it will change. I would sooner invite one of your gods into the Yuirwood."

That could not have been an easy confession. Alassra reached out to him. "Give me your hand, dear friend."

"My lady?"

"I don't want you getting foolish or forgetful again." When he hesitated, Alassra planted her fists on her hips. "I will not compel you, Trovar Halaern," she said, which meant just the opposite. To protect her forester and the Yuirwood, the Simbul would do whatever she judged necessary. She'd live with her conscience. It had proved quite flexible, quite

adaptable over the centuries. But Alassra's conscience would lie quiet. Halaern held out his hand. She noticed he had removed the ring she'd given him.

"My lady, I gave it to Gren," he explained. "She has more need of it and I was uncomfortable with so much magic."

"Like the Yuirwood. Better the discomfort of magic you know and trust, dear friend, than the influence of some other kind."

The Simbul cast three spells in quick succession. The first one fizzled, reminding her that the Yuirwood resisted magic; the second, identical to the miscast spell, protected Halaern against the more common magical insults; and the third hid the second.

Sometime after midnight she'd need to go off by herself and study the deerskin pages of her spellbook to restore to memory the spells that she'd cast during the day. In the meantime, the air was lifeless. Each breath numbed the lungs and filled the mind with morbid thoughts. Alassra released Halaern's hand. He retreated an arm's length and more. She wondered if, after half a century, she'd finally lost him.

"Lie low, dear friend," she advised. "There's melancholy and worse afoot tonight. Have a care for yourself."

"And you, my lady."

He turned and was quickly swallowed by the Yuirwood where even drow eyes couldn't follow him. Alassra drank from the stream and sluiced her skin. She was sweat-slick again before she returned to the camp. The stifling air had defeated the Cha'Tel'Quessir mourners, even Rizcarn. His aura throbbed dully as he plodded out of the camp. The Simbul let him go. Halaern would find him, if he was meant to be found, and she'd know if Halaern needed her: the spells she'd cast would see to that.

Ebroin waited beside the blankets they wouldn't need tonight, except as protection from the gnats and blackflies. Insects had emerged from hiding once the wind died. The

camp echoed with grunts and slapping.

"Storm's coming," the youth hailed her as Halaern had.

A shiver raced down her spine, followed by beads of sweat. The full moon couldn't come soon enough for Aglarond's queen. "Did the mourning ease your heart at all?"

He shrugged and winced, favoring his right side. "I said good-bye to my mother . . . and my father. It was strange, with him sitting beside me. I drank more honey wine than I've ever drunk; all it did was make my heart beat fast. Everything seemed slow around me. I heard the silences between words louder than the words themselves."

Alassra slapped a blackfly and felt it die beneath her hand. Halaern wasn't the only distracted and forgetful person in the Yuirwood. She was accustomed to heightened senses; she'd forgotten the side effects her spell would have on Ebroin. "Did the silences help you mourn?"

"They don't bother me anymore. My side does. Do you want to look at it?"

She did. Between the honey wine and the haste spell, Bro's body was in turmoil. The Simbul had already had one spell go awry. She judged it wiser to leave Bro unhealed until morning. He expected more and turned surly when she kissed him chastely on his cheek.

Alassra set aside her better judgment and sent him to a dreamless sleep with a spell. Then she left the camp and stared at her spellbook until dawn. Even the simple things came hard.

The wind came up with the sun. The sky brightened to a gray glare; the storm still hung high, unable or unwilling to descend. Only Rizcarn seemed unaffected by the stifling weather. He gave the order to break camp and harried everyone until all the Cha'Tel'Quessir were moving.

Chayan stayed close to Bro, who wanted nothing to do with her. She kept the Simbul's eye on the forest. The Red Wizards were out there, one could only imagine the effect this weather was having on their notoriously brittle

temperaments. One could only imagine the power of the storm when it did break loose. Green leaves fell like autumn as the Cha'Tel'Quessir trudged east following one of the trade trails. Living branches snapped and were swept to ground. One man was struck by a tree limb. He fell and broke his arm.

If that were the worst injury they carried out of this day, they'd be very lucky.

Rizcarn would have marched them all day without rest, but noon found everyone flagged and slouched on the ground. Bro was pale. He leaned against a tree, holding his side with his eyes tightly closed.

Ignored as she approached, Alassra touched Bro's arm to get his attention. "I'll take a look at that again."

Sullen and graceless, Bro pulled off his shirt. Alassra didn't need magic to see that something was wrong. The cautery burns were raw again and weeping blood; the holes were swollen and nearly black. The one in the front showed a fresh gouge where he'd cut it with her poison-proof knife.

"You did your best," he said, fitting his arm into the sleeve again. "It doesn't hurt.. . much."

"Did I say I was finished?"

"I did, Chayan." He glowered at the hand Alassra laid on his arm. "Let go of me."

The Simbul was going to heal him, with or without his permission, fully and unsubtly, but without an audience. She'd charm his will, if she needed to, to get him away from the other Cha'Tel'Quessir. "They need cleansing, Ebroin. At least let me wash them. There's a pool upstream."

"No. Not again."

"Ebroin—" Alassra readied a mild compulsion.

He relented before she had to use it and sat miserably on a rock while she poured clear water over his burns.

"It would be easier if we were in the water."

The spell Alassra wanted to use, a spell of her own devising that converted the raw magical power of wizardry into

healing, would be easier to conceal if they were both up to their necks in water.

"No."

"Well, I'm getting in the water. It'll be cooler and maybe drier, too."

"As you—"

Alassra kicked off her sandals and leapt into the pool. She hit the water like a rock and drenched Bro where he sat.

—"Wish." He swiped his hair one-handed and started to walk away. "I'm going."

"Ebroin, behave yourself. Those holes of yours need cool water. Lots of it. Get over here."

"Or what? You'll cast a spell on me?"

"I might, Ebroin. You never know. I might have to do all manner of things, but all I want to do is get the fire out of those wounds of yours."

The Simbul had seen more enthusiastic criminals on their way to the Velprintalar gallows, but he came, took off his boots—her boots—and his belt—with her knife on it. He stood on the rock and stayed there. She hooked an arm behind his knees.

"Oh, Ebroin," she complained as she pulled him into the water. "You're enough to make a grown woman cry."

While Bro struggled, Alassra loosed the spell that Elminster—with his usual flair for overblown language—nicknamed the synostodweomer. The water churned around them and glowed with rainbow colors. On the bank, a willow tree became an incandescent torch that flashed and died in an eye blink. Whatever one called the spell, it wasn't subtle, but it was effective, and exhausting.

Bro was stunned. Alassra held him upright in the water and caught her own breath.

"What happened?" he murmured in her ear.

He wasn't the only one asking that question. The Cha'Tel'Quessir, with Rizcarn leading them, were coming.

"Relkath protects," Alassra told them. "He sacrificed a tree to

heal your son's wounds."

She pushed Bro toward the bank where Rizcarn grabbed an arm and hauled him out of the water. Front and back, puckered scars marked where the arrow had pierced Bro's hide. The cautery burns were smooth skin a few shades darker than the rest of him. Rizcarn himself was awed and speechless.

"Relkath protects," Alassra repeated the phrase she'd heard often enough around the camp. "Zandilar didn't want your son to die."

One by one, the Cha'Tel'Quessir touched Bro's scars. Several of them collected ash from the cindered willow. Bro helped Alassra climb out of the pool. He waited until she'd wrung out her shirt and retied her sandals before asking:

"What truly happened back there? What did you see?"

"Me? I closed my eyes, Ebroin. You tell me, what did you see?"

"But you said—"

"I lied. You were healed. Does it matter who did it or how? Let it be Relkath, that's what Rizcarn and the others want to believe."

They trudged another hundred paces in silence.

"I thought it was you, Chayan. I thought I felt magic pass from you to me."

"Nonsense, Ebroin," she said, though that was precisely what had happened. "A self-sword like me, making trees explode? What do I look like, the Simbul herself?"

"No. Of course not. It's just... Chayan, I'm not myself. I don't know me anymore. But I—I could more than like you, Chayan—if I thought you cared."

"Oh, Ebroin, I care. I care very much, but I'll move on, too. I don't stay in one place very long."

"I guess that's what Rizcarn told my mother."

Alassra slipped her hand around Bro's. "There's a time for thinking about tomorrow, Ebroin, but it's not when there's a hanging storm over your head."

They walked through a sultry afternoon where the only breeze was the hot breath wafting from their lungs. From time to time, Alassra glimpsed Halaern or another forester pacing them in the near distance. Like them, she kept her senses honed for Red Wizard activity. Spread out and nearly mindless, the Cha'Tel'Quessir were vulnerable to attack, but none came. The Thayans were taking their cues from Rizcarn, following him to the Sunglade along with two-score Cha'Tel'Quessir.

Sunset was a smear of hot-forged steel on the western horizon. Night was black and marked by whiplash winds that came without warning. Halaern could have said whether the storm had followed them as they walked or whether it was as large as the Yuirwood, but Halaern wasn't available for conversation. Alassra knew only that it had been hanging for a full night and day: longer than any summer storm in her memory.

Rizcarn kept them walking. Alassra cut her finger on her sister's knife and kept pace with the Cha'Tel'Quessir. She wondered how the Red Wizards were faring, but not through any misplaced compassion. Though there were spells that would give a human man or woman elven vision for a night, there was a good chance that they'd do something rash if they thought their quarry was getting ahead of them. Even if it were Mythrell'aa herself pacing them, the illusionist was surely traveling with a wizard who could cast the invocation spell for lightning into the hanging storm to bring it down on them all.

Alassra's worst fears seemed confirmed when the winds intensified and pummeled the Cha'Tel'Quessir from every direction. Thunder began, not as ear-splitting cracks but in long, low-pitched rumbles. The sky stayed dark; lightning hadn't yet broken free.

Three steps farther, and Alassra stopped. Lightning was her favorite death spell. When she cast it, the white-hot bolts were met and balanced by a counterthrust from deep within

the soil. That force was building under her feet. Looking into the trees, she glimpsed ghostly blue fingers rising from the topmost branches.

The trees of the Yuirwood and all the life beneath them were about to get caught in a battle between the sky and the ground. Alassra threw aside her bow, her arrows, her steel-headed spear and unbuckled her sword belt: She touched one of the studs on her shirt. Her finger healed and the forest went dark.

"Get down!" she shouted in a voice that carried over the wind. "Lie flat."

She might as well have told them to pray to Relkath. When the first bolt struck, a pine tree burst into flames. The second bolt struck an oak. A branch bore the bolt to the trunk, the trunk carried it to the ground where it spread out like a spider's web. Alassra felt it pass beneath her feet, then the thunder fell down on them.

There was panic among them as the Cha'Tel'Quessir ignored her advice, and perhaps just as well. The burning pine collected three more bolts in blinding succession, then it sprouted arms and hurled fire to the ground. Alassra had no time to wonder if she faced a monster summoned by the Red Wizards or something created by the Yuirwood. She shed her Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise and hurled a lightning bolt at its heart, drawing all its fury to a single target: herself.

The Simbul met lightning with lightning, fire with fire, all the while trying to maintain a protective shield around those Cha'Tel'Quessir who might still be alive beneath the battle. As with so many wizardry duels, there was no question of wounding her foe. She strove for annihilation, though if her own defenses wavered, by Mystra's mercy she would escape a similar fate—unless she consciously chose to die.

That thought was never in her mind during the few score moments that the battle raged. It couldn't be, not until sheets of black rain put a stop to the fighting by transforming the creature of fire into a collapsing mass of

smoke and ash.

Exhausted and undisguised, Alassra caught her breath in the aftermath. In nearly six hundred years of wizardry, she'd never felt so impotent. The rain had quenched the monster, not her, not all her magic. She'd never touched it. If it were the native force of the Yuirwood, then no wonder the elven sages worried. If it were something new from Thay, then all the gods of Faerun were at risk.

25

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Before dawn, the twenty-fourth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Bro sat where he'd fallen when the storm started, knees drawn up to his chin, trying to take advantage of the shelter a shoulder-high cedar provided from the wind and rain. He was soaked to the bone and shaking, as much from memories as from the cold. From the first thunder crack he'd relived the nightmare of Sulalk while the nightmare of the Yuirwood played out above him. His throat was raw. He'd screamed himself hoarse, but he didn't remember making a sound, didn't remember anything except mindless, endless terror. There might have been a man, tall as a tree and formed from fire, hurling flame and lightning at the Cha'Tel'Quessir. There might have been a woman, too, standing with the Cha'Tel'Quessir, shrouded in silver who fought with fire and lightning of her own.

Zandilar.

Zandilar, who'd first come to him when he sat beneath a Sulalk tree, seducing him with promises of the Yuirwood. Zandilar, who'd taken the colt into the ground. Zandilar, who'd surrounded him with soft light when there was a Thayan arrow in his back. Zandilar, who, according to Chayan, had healed him in a deep-water pool.

Once Dent said the worst thing that could happen to a man was that a god took an interest in his life. Bro had dismissed his stepfather's remark as typically shortsighted, typically

human, typically Dent. The Cha'Tel'Quessir were different; their gods were different. . . better. Of course, he'd been younger then, at least a month younger. Beside the cedar tree, Bro admitted to Dent that he hadn't known what he was talking about. Everything had been simple while he'd lived among humans, dreaming of the Yuirwood.

Nothing was simple now, least of all, the Yuirwood gods.

When Bro thought about it, there was a third layer of nightmare in his memory, between Sulalk and the loud, fiery battle he'd just survived. He'd seen the flaming man before, not as tall and not in flames, when he'd cowered behind the Simbul in an out-of-place, out-of-time part of the forest. The Simbul was someone Bro tried not to think about but, like Zandilar, she'd taken irreplaceable things from him and also saved his life with lightning.

Bro wondered—without wanting to—whether there was some connection between Zandilar the Dancer and Aglarond's queen, some reason that they would both want a twilight-colored colt or would do battle with the same enemies.

Such thoughts left Bro more uncomfortable than the waning storm. He raised his head and looked around.

The wind was down to a damp breeze. Rain fell in slow, soft drops from the trees rather than like stones from the sky. Above the trees, the moon—a crescent shy of full—chased away ragged clouds. Bro wrung out his hair. He stood slowly, half-expecting something new and terrible to happen when he straightened his back. His ears hadn't been deafened as they'd been at Sulalk. He could hear the dripping trees . . . the faint, infrequent moaning of wounded Cha'Tel'Quessir.

"Chayan? Rizcarn? Yongour?" Bro didn't know the names of the other Cha'Tel'Quessir his father collected. He'd refused to learn them because they hadn't learned his. "Anyone?"

He heard a moan and saw someone trapped beneath a fallen tree.

"I'm coming!"

Bro grabbed a tree limb. It came apart in his hands. He held the broken piece in the moonlight. His mind made sense of what his eyes saw: not a tree limb, but a Cha'Tel'Quessir limb: an arm, charred stiff at the elbow and wrist. Bro didn't so much drop it, as let go and retreat. He gagged bile and forced himself to look at one corpse burned beyond all recognition and at a second that he'd thought—wrongly—had been the source of the moan.

It was Sulalk again, Shali and Dent again, Lanig again, and Bro was stretched beyond his ability to accept what he saw as the truth. He dropped to his knees, then curled forward, hands holding his head down and against the ground. His eyes were open; no tears flowed. His mouth was open; he could neither retch nor scream. Aching with pain his body couldn't feel, Bro made himself small and prayed for the nightmare to end.

"Ebroin. Ebroin, listen to me. Come around, Ebroin."

Chayan's voice, her hands between his shoulders, urging him to sit up. She had her sword still, the spear, bow, and arrows were gone.

"No. Go away."

"I can't. I need your help, Ebroin. Come around. Look at me."

"Leave me alone. I want to die."

"No, you don't. Look at me, Ebroin."

Chayan got her hand beneath Bro's arm. She dug her fingers between his healed ribs. He flinched; that was all the leverage she needed to get him sitting upright again. Then her hands surrounded his jaw. Her thumbs pressed against his cheeks.

"They're all dead, Chayan!"

"Not all of them, not you, not me. You can't help this one, but there are others."

She pulled Bro to his feet. When she let go, he looked down—by accident, to avoid looking at her. Everything was as it had been: two corpses, one completely charred, the other bloody and torn. When he started to shake, Chayan slapped

him hard. Bro's arm came up to return the blow. She seized his wrist.

"Later, Ebroin."

"How—?" Bro asked, but he knew the answer. Anger had restored him, if restored was the proper word. A chasm loomed between him and what he saw when he looked anywhere in the moonlight. There were the unlucky ones, the ones who hadn't survived. Bro didn't want to join them, but he wasn't grateful, either, to the woman who'd opened the chasm. "Don't you see? Don't you care? Or have you seen worse, fighting everyone, everywhere?" He made the question scornful.

"I have, Ebroin. You don't want to imagine what I've seen. And I still care. When we have done what we must, then I'll sit and weep and fold my arms over my head, just like you." Still holding his wrist, Chayan led Bro across devastation. Trees were down, burnt or toppled outright, leaving muddy craters. There were more bodies, charred, blasted, and in pieces. The scents of death, charred wood and burnt flesh, hung in the air despite the breeze.

"How many?" Bro asked. "How bad?"

"Thirteen dead. Thirteen that I can find. Thirteen alive, counting you and me. The rest are ..." Chayan swept her free arm in front of them. "The rest are missing, including Rizcarn."

Bro stumbled. It was inconceivable that his father—his once-dead father—hadn't survived. Or maybe, not so inconceivable. Maybe Zandilar had taken Rizcarn into the ground along with the colt, leaving him and twelve others alive ... as a warning: Don't anger the Yuirwood. Don't go to the Sunglade.

The other survivors, hollow-eyed and silent, sat in the lee of a large toppled tree. They looked up at him. Bro imagined Chayan had collected them all and wondered, when she released his wrist, why she'd collected him last. One said, "Rizcarn's son," as he sat down. He said nothing; even now,

he wasn't one of them, wasn't a person in their eyes.

Chayan scrounged wood; Bro didn't ask where. She laid a fire. If the decision had been his, Bro would have said he'd never want to see flames again, but Chayan didn't ask. The gently crackling tinder and firefly sparks widened the chasm between death and survival. One of the men began to weep. One of the women took out a broken loaf of journey bread. Bro's share of the baking, tied up in the remnants of his Sulalk shirt and slung from his belt, had become a sodden lump he wasn't hungry enough to eat.

Chayan appeared at Bro's side. She offered bread from her own pack before saying, "We must search for your father."

Bro looked at the destruction surrounding them. He thought of the missing Cha'Tel'Quessir, and that missing meant worse than dead, worse than cindered. Missing meant burst into pieces too small to find.

"Why look? Why not assume he's dead, instead of looking for a bit here, a bit there? Say the wizards got him and say we're lucky they didn't get us, too. Our gods have cursed us, Chayan."

"All right, Ebroin. I'm not going to argue with you. I'll be back around dawn. You'll be safe enough here."

He looked at the others gathered around the fire, the Cha'Tel'Quessir who didn't know his name. "I'm coming."

They were in the undamaged Yuirwood before Bro spoke again. "This time I did see Zandilar. I looked up during the firestorm. I saw her fighting a monster that looked like a man made from fire. That's two times in one day that she saved my life."

Chayan stared at him sideways. She looked puzzled, maybe jealous.

"I suppose I owe her a prayer, some sort of offering. With Lanig dead and Yongour—maybe she's decided I should dance with her after all."

"I wouldn't think you owe Zandilar any more than you think you owe the Simbul. They both saved your life, but Zandilar

took your colt, Ebroin. Seems to me that you'd be about even."

"The Simbul—" he began to explain that Aglarond's queen had started everything downhill when she tried to steal Dancer from him in Sulalk. But he'd said that before. It didn't matter how anything had started, just that it ended in the Sunglade.

Chayan's cousin, Halaern, served Aglarond's queen and Halaern couldn't have been far away when the storm-framed battle erupted between Zandilar and the flame-man. Like Rizcarn, the forester was missing. Once the thought had occurred to him, Bro realized that he cared more whether Trovar Halaern had survived than whether Rizcarn had, but when he suggested that they might look for the forester instead, Chayan shook her head sharply.

"We need Rizcarn," she insisted, beginning to sound like Lanig or Yongour, or the Cha'Tel'Quessir sitting around the little fire.

"We need to go home," he countered, but neither of them had homes waiting for them.

They wandered, keeping track of their position by the stars and finding the occasional faded Relkath rune, left over from other seasons when Rizcarn had wandered the Yuirwood. Chayan admitted the possibility that Rizcarn was truly missing; Bro suggested that Zandilar had taken him with her after she defeated the flame man. That was the wrong thing to say.

"Zandilar didn't defeat the Old Man of the Yuirwood. Mark me on this, Ebroin: The storm defeated the Old Man—the way running out of arrows will defeat an archer. All Zandilar did was attract his attention."

"Still, she might have taken Rizcarn to the same place she took Dancer."

"She was humbled. She didn't take anything away from this battle."

Bro argued, but not for long. They both spotted the brightly

glowing tree at the same time. Chayan, Bro noticed, had her hand on her sword as they approached. The first thing Bro noticed was that none of the light came from Rizcarn. It all came from the tree where his father chiselled a Relkath rune. Rizcarn's clothes were torn and ragged. A raw burn ran the length of his right arm. It was painful to behold, but didn't seem to affect him as he hammered an iron chisel with a rock-hammer. By the depth of the cuts, Rizcarn had been chiseling and rechiseling the same rune for quite a while.

"Wake up the trees, Rizcarn." Bang! "Gather the Cha'Tel'Quessir, Rizcarn." Bang! "Lead them to the Sunglade, Rizcarn." Bang! Bang! Bang! "Wake up the trees." "Poppa?" Bro called, keep a good distance between himself and the tree, and grateful for Chayan's sword, which he assumed she could use. "Poppa?" he called a second time, louder than before.

"Ember? Is that Ember?"

Rizcarn turned around with the rock and chisel still in his hands. There was a gouge across his face that ran diagonally from his forehead to his cheek. One eye was swollen shut; the other had the white-ringed aspect of madness. Yet Ember had been Bro's name before his father died, a name Rizcarn hadn't used since they'd reunited.

Bro exchanged a glance with Chayan, who nodded in response to his unasked question.

"Yes, it's me, Poppa. Ember. Chayan and I have come looking for you."

"You have a ladylove now? You're growing up ... grown. I didn't see you grow. How is your mother, Ember? I haven't seen her in so long, either. I've been with the trees, waking up the trees." He gestured with his chisel and rock. "So many trees. Wake up the trees to protect the forest."

"Poppa, Shali's dead. Lanig's dead. Yongour's dead. A whole lot of Cha'Tel'Quessir died tonight. Don't you remember."

Rizcarn's open eye blinked. "Shali dead? When? How? Lanig and Yongour?"

Of all the madness Bro imagined for his father, this one, in which Rizcarn appeared oblivious to his own wounds, to the destruction into which he'd led them had never entered his mind.

"How—?" he began sharply. Chayan took his arm. Bro jerked free and turned his question at her instead. "How can he not remember? How can he pretend he doesn't remember? Look at him. He was there. He was hurt. How can he not remember?"

"You were lying in the mud with your hands over your head. You told me to go away. You told me you wanted to die."

"But I remembered!"

"You weren't responsible for all those who died. There's no guessing what got jarred loose in Rizcarn's mind. You think you saw Zandilar—"

"Zandilar?" Rizcarn interrupted. "You saw Zandilar? Did she come to protect the Cha'Tel'Quessir? Did Relkath wake up to protect the trees?"

"See? He does remember. He was pretending."

But Chayan ignored him; she had her own questions to ask.

"Protect the trees and the Cha'Tel'Quessir from what, Rizcarn? What did Zandilar fight back there? What waited in the storm? Why did it want to stop you from leading the Cha'Tel'Quessir to the Sunglade?"

For a moment it seemed that Rizcarn knew the answers to Chayan's questions and would share them. Then his mad eye narrowed with cunning intelligence. "Where are the others?" He looked left and right before choosing the direction that would lead him back to Chayan's little fire.

"There's still time. She cares for you, Ebroin. She's forgiven you. Zandilar will dance with you at the Sunglade. The rest doesn't matter."

And though the dancing goddess had saved his life, that was nothing Bro wanted to hear. He didn't like the way Rizcarn's manner had changed so suddenly, either, almost as if something sleeping inside Rizcarn had awakened. Bro

tried not to think about the warning Chayan and Halaern had given him: Rizcarn might be possessed by a Red Wizard, but at this moment possession seemed preferable to some of the other thoughts in his head. He wrapped his hand around the hilt of the Simbul's dagger.

Beside him, Chayan cursed and muttered under her breath. "He knows. He knows. At least he knows who it was ... what it was. It's Yuirwood, not Thayan. He wouldn't know the Red Wizards." She paused. "Cold tea and crumpets. That body we found. Half wizard, half Cha'Tel'Quessir. What walked away? Half Cha'Tel'Quessir, half wizard? Could that happen? It could happen. Anything can happen in the Yuirwood. What does he remember? Halaern said the Yuirwood doesn't like him. Well, maybe it wouldn't, not if he's half wizard. And where does Zandilar fit in? Elminster! You hairy old goat, this is all your fault!"

"Elminster?" Bro knew the name. Everyone alive knew Elminster's name. "Is Elminster involved in this?"

Chayan scowled. "Elminster? Who said anything about Elminster?"

"You did, just now. You said 'Elminster, you hairy old goat, this is all your fault.'—"

"You heard me say that?" She scowled deeper and stared at his hand, still clutching the knife, before she shook her head. "I must be getting tired. It's something we said fighting the Tuigans. Whenever something went wrong: Elminster, this is your fault."

Bro walked beside her another few steps before saying, "You said it in Trade." He meant the common human language of all Faerun.

"There weren't many Cha'Tel'Quessir up fighting the Tuigans, Ebroin. You pick up a lot of languages when you spend your life fighting other folk's battles. Wait and see, when I'm truly exhausted, I might start cursing in goblin or orc."

Bro didn't expect to hear either of those exotic languages any time soon. He wasn't entirely convinced Chayan was

tired. Rizcarn certainly wasn't. He was striding across the moonlit ground as if he'd just awakened from a good night's sleep and Chayan was having no trouble keeping up with him. The sell-sword was as strange as everything else in Bro's strange journey from Sulalk to who-knew-where, but when she held out her hand, he grasped it without hesitation.

There were eight, not eleven, Cha'Tel'Quessir waiting for them when they got back to the fire. Rizcarn said they should start walking again. Bro argued, saying they should wait until dawn and look for more survivors. He turned to Chayan, expecting her support, but she was as stone-faced as the others.

"Do you want to be in this place when the sun comes up?" she asked.

"No, but—"

"There are no more survivors, Ebroin."

"The dead?"

"It took four men half a day to dig Lanig's grave."

"Their beads?"

Chayan patted a pouch at her waist. "I have all I could find."

Rizcarn was leading the other eight away.

"This is war, Ebroin." She held out her hand again.

Bro shook it off. "It's Sulalk. It's the same as Sulalk." He had an unwelcome vision of crows and vultures perched on the cottage roof. "It's not right," he muttered, on the verge, suddenly, of tears. "It's not fair."

"It never is, Ebroin."

She took his hand and led him away.

They walked through dawn and into a bright, cool morning. Fewer people made faster progress along the trail. Bro recognized the forest now, in a general way. Details had changed in seven years, of course, but he knew when they were near MightyTree and said nothing as they walked past the trails that would have taken him south and west to home.

Rizcarn called a midday halt. Two of the Cha'Tel'Quessir fell asleep as soon as they sat. The rest ate what they had before closing their eyes. Rizcarn found a suitable rock to use with his chisel and started carving Relkath's rune into every tree large enough to hold it. Chayan told Bro to take a nap while she kept watch.

"Once I fall asleep, you're going to go off and talk to your cousin."

"You have a suspicious mind, Ebroin."

"But you are, aren't you? You wouldn't have walked away if you hadn't known he was alive. You're going to ask him about the Red Wizards, whether they were close enough to get killed, and tell him what you've seen, so he can tell the Simbul."

"And I suppose you'll follow me, if I don't invite you to come along?"

He didn't bother answering the question, but got up and walked with her. Trovar Halaern waited in the crook of a tree no more than three hundred paces from where they'd been sitting. The forester was tired and ragged.

"Bad storm last night, cousin," he said as he leapt down from the tree. "Worse for you though. I see Rizcarn survived, and Ebroin. You're still headed for the Sunglade?"

"Zandilar has Ebroin's colt. My bones say she's going to dance tonight whether we're there or not. What about our Red Wizard spies? How did they fare last night?"

"Better than they deserved, my—cousin. Wet and frightened and convinced that they're on the right trail. They outnumber you now, almost two to one. Rizcarn seems to be a changed man."

"Several times over," Chayan agreed. "I'm starting to think that corpse the Simbul found—"

Halaern cleared his throat. "The foresters found it, cousin, following her suggestions."

"I knew I didn't find it. But it wasn't wholly Cha'Tel'Quessir or Red Wizard, and I don't think Rizcarn is, either."

"That should make tonight more than interesting."

Chayan nodded. "I think it's time to make it less interesting. Ebroin had a good idea the other day. There're too many Red Wizards in the Yuirwood."

"And the Simbul?"

"If she asks, we'll blame it on Elminster, won't we, Ebroin?"

"Elminster?" Halaern looked from his cousin to Bro.

"It's a joke, I think," Bro explained. He wished he'd had the sense to stay with the other Cha'Tel'Quessir. When Chayan and her cousin bantered, he felt like a child who only understood every other word in adult conversation. "I overheard her cursing Elminster last night after the storm. She said it was a habit she picked up fighting the Tuigans."

"You never mentioned that, cousin."

Chayan flashed a dangerously toothsome grin. "When do we have a chance to talk, cousin? What about our solitaire Red Wizard, the one that followed Rizcarn out of the camp when it was west of here? At first you said you thought it was a woman. Why? And do you still think so?"

"Before Rizcarn left, I found a footprint, small and narrow. It could've come from a child or a halfling, but my best guess was a woman. I haven't seen any more. She's smarter than the others, I think, and she's alone, or nearly so. I never saw her, only felt her presence, and I haven't felt it since Rizcarn left. She's stopped using magic."

Chayan seemed lost in her own thoughts. Bro seized an opportunity to ask a question that had been very important two days ago, "Did Rizcarn actually visit MightyTree? He said he would, but he wasn't gone long enough, even if he ran day and night."

"It would seem that he did, Ebroin. According to Urell, Rizcarn, or something like him, appeared at his door in the middle of the night and gave him his daughter's necklace. Rizcarn said he couldn't stay, but wanted a mourning bead, so Urell gave him one off his own neck. That is MightyTree work." The forester pointed to the bead in question.

"How?"

"Why not ask him yourself?" Chayan asked, more an order than a question. She turned to Halaern. "You'll join me after?"

"Yes," he agreed, but she was already walking away, not as quiet as a forester, but quiet enough that she was quickly gone. "Come on, Ebroin. I'll walk you back to the others."

Bro folded his arms. "I'm not a child, Trovar Halaern, and I saw what Red Wizards can do to a whole village. She's got a sword, that's all. She doesn't even have her spear anymore and she decides—just like that—that she's going to destroy the Red Wizards?"

Halaern nodded. "Let's go, Ebroin."

"Chayan's not what she says she is, is she?"

"She's very good at what she does, and one of the things she does is destroy her enemies, including Red Wizards."

"She's not your cousin."

The forester gave up with a sigh. "No, Ebroin, Chayan's not my cousin; and she's not what she seems, either."

"She's Zandilar in disguise, isn't she?"

Halaern was speechless. Bro was pleased with himself and his guess. He started back to the napping Cha'Tel'Quessir. A twig snapped; the forester must be so flustered that he was making noise as he caught up. Bro turned around. He saw a shadow, then a face, then hands that grabbed him.

He heard a voice from deeper in the shadow: "Good, Lailomun, my pet. You caught him. Now bring him here."

Bro struggled and as he did he heard another voice, the forester's, but it came too late. He fell forward into darkness.

26

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Afternoon, the twenty-fourth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

The queen of Aglarond shed her Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise as she walked through the forest, in search of Thayan wizardry. She became herself, silver haired, blue eyed, and

deadly, but still dressed in the durable leather garments Chayan SilverBranch had worn. Her shadow, cast by the sun and by magic, rustled branches as she moved beneath them. The Simbul, when she was hunting Red Wizards, scorned stealth.

A Red Wizard, especially a solitary novice sent to keep an eye on the Cha'Tel'Quessir, knew he was in trouble well before he knew what that trouble was. Alassra heard the novice break into a noisy run, headed straight for his companions. They'd be waiting for her, ready as they could be; that concerned her not at all. Fair play was a worthy notion in children's games, but when it came to squashing one's enemies, the Simbul liked to have them facing her and concentrated in a single location where lightning and fire were most effective. If Mythrell'aa had been among them, Alassra might have changed her tactics, but Mythrell'aa was surely the solitaire and the reason Alassra was exterminating lesser nuisances.

It was difficult for one wizard to judge the true might of another. Above a certain level of proficiency, all wizards were liars. The Simbul fostered notions that she was reckless—not entirely untrue—and careless with her wizardry, when in truth, she detested magical surprises and meticulously planned her spellcasting. The result, as she intended, was that her enemies both feared her and continually underestimated her.

By hard-learned habit, Alassra never underestimated her enemies. She assumed Mythrell'aa had the means to do whatever she wanted. And Illusion's means, full of shadow and guile, were particularly difficult to combat. The Simbul didn't want her concentration muddled with echoes and novices. She also didn't want to light up the afternoon sky with incendiary spells. As she approached the clump of Red Wizards, poorly concealed in trees and behind bushes, she reached into her belt pouch and retrieved a brightly painted goose egg. Walking into their woeful trap, she presented her

usual array of defensive spells and a deadly surprise, encased in the goose egg.

An assortment of spells came her way as she lobbed the egg into their midst. Most of the spells, fireballs, and magic arrows fizzled when they got within three paces of her. The wizards had never learned that she was immune to their most common spells. Of course, very few of them survived long enough to share the knowledge.

One of the Red Wizards, thinking quickly but erroneously, launched a spell at the painted egg. It would have cracked and begun its work when it struck the ground, but breaking it in midair was more effective. Once released, an invisible sphere expanded until it was ten paces across. Pushing the Yuirwood air ahead, it left suffocating emptiness behind. Bug-eyed and choking, the wizards died swiftly.

The sphere wasn't impermeable. Alassra watched for escapees. Two thought they were safe until she hurled poison-dipped stars at their necks and dropped them before they'd filled their lungs with fresh air. The larger of the pair, a portly man with a thick wattle of flesh beneath his tattooed chin, was still alive when she reached him. Poison had already turned his face dark blue and stiffened his limbs. He was in agony; there had been days in Alassra's life when she would have stood back to watch him die. Being queen, however, had taught her to value efficiency, if not mercy.

She took a moment to ask a question:

"Are there others, not caught with you?"

He lied, of course, but the Simbul took the truth directly from his mind before ending his life: they'd stood united and died the same way. Alassra removed her throwing star from his flesh and, after cleaning it carefully, returned it to the leather case where she kept a score of the deadly metal bits. By habit she stripped the wizards of anything obviously useful. Red Wizards carried the best weapons, the best gear, magical or otherwise, that their wealth could provide and

most of it was neither inherently good nor evil. Two of their daggers had malignant personalities that challenged her when she touched them; the Simbul destroyed those immediately, but stowed the rest in a pouch similar to the one she wore that was larger within than without. Their gold and silver, jewelry, and their bodies she left behind for scavengers.

The other clutch of Red Wizards was harder to find. The Simbul would have liked her chief forester's help, but she didn't need it. There was a good chance that Bro needed Trovar Halaern's wisdom more than she needed his tracking skills. She continued circling around the Cha'Tel'Quessir and had cleared about two-thirds of the circumference when she came upon the wizards, surprising herself as much as she surprised them.

Alassra was just as glad Halaern was elsewhere. She'd never handled embarrassment well, and the first moments of the skirmish were nothing short of embarrassing, with frantic Red Wizards hopping about, trying to make good use of their last moments and her having to bring them down one by one. This group was larger than the first and supported with archers, who, having no spells and few choices in their memories, kept their wits better than the wizards did, although their arrows, which burst into all-consuming flames as they neared her, were no more effective than fireballs.

She slew them all and could only hope that, in the confusion, no Red Wizard had managed to slip away. Halaern could deal with that problem. He'd had enough time to solve the world's problems, let alone Ebroin of MightyTree's.

Halaern—dear friend—

When there was no immediate answer, the Simbul searched her mind for the circlet's echo. It proved cold and nearly lifeless beneath her mental fingers. Carefully controlling her thoughts, Alassra took two measured steps to the right, then two more, listening to the echo. When she had Halaern's location fixed in her mind, she started running. She

reassembled her Cha'Tel'Quessir disguise as she ran.

Alassra found the forester in the brush between the tree where they'd talked and the camp where the Cha'Tel'Quessir napped, oblivious to all danger. Halaern's arms were swollen to the elbow and discolored with the black-and-white patches of severe frostbite—hardly the injury she expected to see in height of summer. Bro was nowhere to be seen. As she knelt beside her unconscious friend, the Simbul had a bad feeling that she knew what had happened.

Halaern could have healed himself more easily than she could, had he been conscious. The foresters had mastered the Yuirwood's magic before they came to her. Her circlets enhanced their power, but didn't create it. However, he wasn't conscious. Alassra tried to rouse him with his name, with gentle pressure on both his shoulder, and with vaporous white crystals she carried as a purifying reagent. When nothing worked, she opened a shiny steel vial and began working ointment into the discolored flesh.

Halaern came to when she had one arm nearly restored to its natural dimensions and color. His eyes filled with comprehension, then closed with a sigh.

"I lost him, my queen."

"The solitaire?" Alassra asked, knowing the answer. She continued massaging the ointment into his arm.

The forester levered himself into a sitting position. "One moment he was there. The next there was a shadow around him. I wasn't quick enough. I wasn't where I should have been."

Alassra started on his other arm. "You did your best. It's my fault for leaving everyone unprotected. While I was here, she couldn't get close enough. Once I'd left ... It would have happened anyway, Halaern. Don't blame yourself."

Halaern shook his head. "It is my fault, my lady. I wasn't beside him. He'd said something outrageous—that you were Zandilar—and I let him get ahead of me. If I'd been beside him—"

"I would have lost both of you. The solitaire is a zulkir, my friend. The Zulkir of Illusion and an old, old enemy. I've expected her since I arrived in the forest. She's a small woman. When you mentioned a small, isolated footprint, I knew which one was her, but I thought I still had time to trap her. I was wrong. My mistake. My fault."

Halaern applied internal healing to his discolored flesh and the wounds faded like frost. "My heart lies heavy to think what a zulkir will do with him."

"No heavier than mine." They began walking to the Cha'Tel'Quessir. "But don't lose hope entirely. It won't satisfy her to take him. Whatever she has in mind—and I have a few guesses on that score—she won't do it unless I witness it. We'll have a chance. Mystra's mercy, we'll have a chance."

"Did you solve your other problems?"

"Yes, for all the good it's done us."

Rizcarn was still carving runes. He set down his rock and chisel when he saw Chayan and Trovar Halaern of Yuirwood walking grim-faced toward him.

* * * * *

Mythrell'aa hated the Yuirwood, hated the buzzing insects, the bits of dead leaves that got into her robes and made her skin itch. She hated last night's rain and wind, even though she'd made herself a secure shelter against it. She hated today's mud that ruined her sandals and made her stumble. She hated everything about the forest, but she was deeply satisfied that she'd made the journey from Bezantur.

The mongrel—Alassra's pet—lay blind and silent on the ground, fighting futilely against the spells she'd lashed around his body and his will.

The thing Mythrell'aa hated most about the Yuirwood was its effect on her magic. Everything was more difficult, as if the very rocks and trees ranged themselves against her. But the forest hadn't withstood her shadows, especially not when Lailomun cast them and walked within them. Keeping Lailomun's attention, though, was a trial. The man's mind

faded so quickly; she'd had to relax his compulsions just so he could obey her commands.

But the mongrel—Ee'bro'een, she'd plucked his name from his surface thoughts—made it all worthwhile. His corrupt elven heritage was quite noticeable: a narrow, feral face, mottled green-and-copper skin and swept-back, pointed ears. Mythrell'aa's flesh crawled when she had to touch him. There was no question of taking him back to Bezantur when she'd gotten her revenge and victory over Alassra Shentrantra. He was supremely expendable.

"Wake up," the Zulkir of Illusion commanded her helpless prisoner, and his eyes sprang open. "Stand up," she added, and he struggled fruitlessly because she hadn't loosened the bonds that held him against the ground. "Suffer," she concluded, and he did, screaming until blood trickled from his nose. "You see, I have all the power and you have none. No one can hear you scream. We are quite perfectly isolated here. Now, you can answer my questions or you can suffer. You have only begun to suffer, Ee'bro'een. The choice is yours."

His mouth worked frantically. Mythrell'aa thought, with some small regret, that he was going to cooperate, but he spat at her instead and she castigated him with a thousand insubstantial cuts. He didn't bleed, but he thought he did; that was the power of illusion and she was the most powerful illusionist in Thay.

Stubborn and deliriously foolish, Ee'bro'een yielded nothing without a struggle. He proved to have a higher tolerance for torment than the few elves that had previously fallen into her hands. She almost reconsidered his expendability.

But the knowledge Mythrell'aa extracted from his mind advised her that while elf-human mongrels might be worth the trouble of collecting and keeping, this particular mongrel had a different destiny. He didn't know why Alassra Shentrantra—the Simbul, as he called her—had taken an interest in him and his horse, and he didn't know that the

woman who'd been marching beside him for the last five days was that same Simbul.

Mythrell'aa hadn't been completely certain herself until last night when the forest erupted in flame and lightning. She knew Alassra's spellcasting signature and it was all over the sky. It was interesting that Ee'bro'een thought his lover was the mongrel goddess, Zandilar, but only insofar as that created possibilities in Mythrell'aa's fertile imagination. Ee'bro'een expected himself, his horse, and his half-breed goddess to dance together at the moment of the full moon, midway through this coming night at a place he knew as the Sunglade.

Odd to worship the moon in a Sunglade, but the forest mongrels were, at best, odd.

Ee'bro'een expected some great miracle to result from this unlikely union, some rebirth of the forest powers, but mostly he expected a night of highly unimaginative passion in his lover's arms.

Ee'bro'een knew the way to the Sunglade, and, after a short deliberation, Mythrell'aa knew what she wanted to have happen there: two events, two triumphs, the first more important than the second. The first would destroy Alassra Shentrantra and the second . . . Mythrell'aa found the notion of impersonating a goddess, even a mongrel goddess, appealing.

To implement her first triumph, Mythrell'aa roused Lailomun from his lethargy. He, too, had become expendable. Generations ago, during Thay's struggle for independence, the transmuter, Lusaka Gur had developed a spell that made the Mulhorandi think twice before capturing a Red Wizard. To cast it was suicide, which, unsurprisingly, had made the spell difficult to perfect. Indeed, Gur's notes showed that in its early versions, he'd cast the spell on someone else: an enemy, a slave, another Red Wizard. Mythrell'aa possessed a true copy of Lusaka Gur's notes. And while she kept the final version of Gur's spell-lash memorized at all times, she'd

found the early mark of Gur more useful.

In either version, it was a complicated spell, far too complicated for Lailomun's addled memory, but he wouldn't have to cast it. He would merely bear its mark until she touched his mind with the triggering words.

"Alassra," Mythrell'aa whispered to her handsome, doomed pet as she anointed him with cade oil. "Alassra Shentrantra. When next you hear those words, my pet, she will be in front of you. No matter what your poor eyes tell you, my pet, it will be her, and you will be free to go to her. Do you hear me, my pet? You will be free." She touched the blue scar on his brow, where the nerves were raw and the path to his memory was clear. "This you will remember."

Lailomun would obey. His affection for the silver-haired wizard had never faltered. He'd run to her, like a fly to fresh turds, and Alassra Shentrantra would die. The bitch-queen had kept that wretched rose-thorn branch for a hundred years. She'd be suspicious, but she wouldn't loose one of her infamous lightning bolts and Lailomun would destroy her as the mark of Gur destroyed him.

The mark of Gur would destroy the rest of the mongrels as well—she'd enlarged its destructive sphere twofold. The Sunblade would belong to Mythrell'aa and Ee'bro'een and whatever power she could wring out of the accursed Yuirwood forest. That would be the second triumph.

By this time tomorrow Mythrell'aa expected to be back in Bezantur, summoning another Convocation where she'd announce the death of Aglarond's silver-eyed queen and the coronation of Thay's first queen-zulkir. It would all happen at midnight. Until then, she'd rest and contemplate the slow, eventful torture of Aznar Thrul. Ee'bro'een had given her the Sunblade's precise location. She could transport herself there and avoid the tedium of walking.

* * * * *

If Rizcarn were a man who remembered his only son with any affection, then Alassra expected him to quake with

horror when he learned that Bro had been seized by a Red Wizard, probably a zulkir. If Rizcarn were a man who was, in part, a Red Wizard, then she expected him to grow wary when he saw Trovar Halaern, the Simbul's chief forester striding beside her. But, by expectation, Rizcarn was neither a father nor a Thayan wizard, though he did react.

"Relkath has turned his face from me. He denies me protection. He has taken away all those who would dance with Zandilar. She will come tonight, but there will be no one there for her to dance with and she will sink back into the ground."

Alassra recalled Bro's description of mist rising from a carved stone and sinking again, taking the colt with it. "Can't you dance with her?" she asked, mostly to see his reaction.

"I have already been chosen—I was chosen. I serve Relkath. I cannot serve Zandilar. She must have another."

Mystra had chosen Elminster, the seven daughters of Elue Shundar, and a handful of others to do a goddess' work in Faerun. It was conceivable that the forgotten Yuirwood gods would do—or try to do—the same. With a glance at Halaern, Alassra pressed forward. "How do you serve Relkath? By bringing the Cha'Tel'Quessir to the Sunglade?"

Rizcarn brandished his chisel. He finished the rune he'd been working on when Alassra and Halaern interrupted him.

"I wake the trees. I tell them to remember the past. That's how I serve Relkath."

"And the Sunglade?"

"Relkath came to me. He told me Zandilar's horse was in the Yuirwood and that I should be its guide. He told me where to find the horse and where to find Zandilar. I found Ebroin, who was my son. Zandilar had chosen Ebroin, but he wouldn't go with her." Rizcarn's face hardened. "My son had been among the dirt-eaters. He'd taken gifts from their queen. He shamed me."

Alassra turned to Halaern, who asked his own questions. "You used to say that Relkath Many-Limbed cherished the

wild heart in a young man's breast. Has he changed so much since the last time you and I talked?"

"Halaern? Trovar Halaern of YuirWood?" Rizcarn squinted. His one eye was still swollen; the other was red where it should have been white. "They would have chosen you, Halaern, if you'd ever listened for their voices."

"All I heard was Cha'Tel'Quessir coming back from the Sunglade, year after year, always with the same story, Rizcarn, always: Next year. Next year it will be different. Next year our gods will hear us. We have no gods, Rizcarn. They were taken away from us before we were born. The Tel'Quessir took them and scattered them from one end of the Yuirwood to the other. There's nothing beneath the Sunglade. Nothing that can't be found in the roots of every tree or beneath every rock."

Rizcarn seemed to not hear any of the words the forester had spoken. "You could serve, Halaern. You're young yet. Throw away the witch-queen's gifts, come to the Sunglade and dance with Zandilar."

The Simbul exchanged another glance with her forester. There were Fangers who called her the witch-queen, and traders from other realms who were uncomfortable with a Cha'Tel'Quessir title whose significance they couldn't quite grasp, but by and large, Aglarondans called her the Simbul. Almost all the Cha'Tel'Quessir did whether they liked her or not. Like the inner circle of the Sunglade, the Simbul belonged to them, however little they understood it or her. The Thayans called her the witch-queen of Aglarond—when they were being respectful, which wasn't very often. Though, speaking to Trovar Halaern, trying to entice him to the Sunglade, might incite a Red Wizard's respect, at least until he'd gotten what he wanted.

Halaern removed the verdigrised circlet. "Will you hold this for me, cousin?"

Alassra considered the narrow band of metal as if it had become a deadly serpent. Her hands remained at her side.

She directed her thoughts at his mind, knowing he would hear them so long as he held the circlet.

This is nonsense, my friend. You heard him. He's all but admitted he's a Red Wizard. There's nothing the Red Wizards would like better than to claim your life. Zandilar will dance anyway. We don't need Rizcarn; we can go ourselves.

I am elder of YuirWood, my lady; the forest will not harm me, and Relkath himself no longer trusts Rizcarn. I will be safe.

You don't believe in Relkath, Halaern!

I believe in you and the Yuirwood, my lady. Rizcarn will be content now, whatever he has become. He'll go forward without suspicion, we need that—you need that—if we're to have an opportunity to save Bro.

Halaern—Zandilar is going to keep whoever she dances with, I'm increasingly certain of that.

My lady, I have danced with a goddess all my life. I'm not afraid of Zandilar. Halaern offered the circlet again. "Please, cousin, it is my wish."

As your queen, Trovar Halaern, I command you to stop this nonsense at once.

I cannot obey. You speak not as my queen, but as my ladylove. My queen, I know, understands.

Alassra took the circlet and placed it on her own brow for safekeeping. Rizcarn gathered the remaining Cha'Tel'Quessir and led the way to the Sunglade.

27

The city of Bezantur, in Thay

Late afternoon, the twenty-fourth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

The first indication that Aznar Thrul's traitorous spy master had of the burgeoning problems in Aglarond had come during the night, when frantic spellbound thoughts awoke her from a fitful sleep. The arcane messages were the same: Something dire and deadly had struck the chattel-kessir mongrels while they marched beneath a hanging

storm, and something equally potent had risen up to defend them with lightning.

The spy master had reminded her minions that they remained safe because they were following their orders to lay low, to attract no attention whatsoever until they spied a horse among the mongrels.

After they saw the horse, their orders were different. The vanguard was to act for the glory of Thay. Her second group followed orders for her personal glory and that of their old master, Deaizul. The spy master had tried to pick up the threads of Deaizul's thoughts. He was with the chattel-kessir, within the mind of their leader. There had been problems earlier, problems that she didn't learn about until the damage was done. She tried to imagine her lover and mentor with a half-breed's pointed ears and mottled skin. It would be difficult, but if they brought Aznar Thrul down, then all things would become possible.

Deaizul, though, had been deep in his chattel-kessir identity and hadn't responded to her spell-sent pleas throughout the night. He would, she thought, have been accessible, if the problems were serious and when she couldn't rouse him, she'd gone about her affairs, blithely convinced that nothing truly significant had occurred.

Other matters occupied the spy master's mind this morning: an assassination in Amruthar, a reminder to a local magistrate that the city's independence depended entirely on the city's willingness to do what it was told. She was in the bolt-hole, updating her encoded notebooks, when the first essence egg exploded within the locked wooden chest. Three more had shattered by the time she opened it. All the broken eggs were bound to her personal minions in the Yuirwood.

She knew the eggs could break, but never in the ten years since Deaizul gave her the box had an egg exploded. Minions died and the powdered essence with their eggs grew dark; they didn't explode.

Frantic, almost beyond rational thought, the spy master dodged flying bits of glass, trying to protect the remaining eggs. To no avail. Within a handful of moments, every egg belonging to a Yuirwood spy was a splintered ruin and every spy—there was no other interpretation—was dead.

The dire beast from last night? The Aglarondan forest harbored creatures unknown in Thay. The Yuirwood itself was magical, so said Deaizul. Could it have killed with such force that death had echoed all the way back to Bezantur? Could there be another explanation? The Simbul had wrecked havoc in the farming village, but the eggs had survived. Mythrell'aa had headed west and disappeared, but swift mass murder wasn't Lady Illusion's style.

The spy master went to the separate cabinet where she kept her own egg and Deaizul's. His was intact and glowing. She held it in her hands. They were bleeding; she hadn't dodged all the glass. She pressed the egg between her breasts. She called Deaizul's name with her heart.

No answer. He was alive—trapped in a mongrel's body, but alive. And not listening to her pleas.

The spy master poured herself a glass of clear liquid. She drained the glass in two gulps, then swallowed another time directly from the decanter. Her heart no longer raced.

Why should Deaizul risk his place among the chattel-kessir by turning his attention toward her when she called? The mongrels were canny, like animals. They'd tear him apart, like animals, if they thought he was not one of them. He was alive. In Bezantur, nothing more mattered.

She poured another glass. Calmer now, she could see that events had gone for the best. She could tell the zulkir that the Yuirwood had unmasked her spies and their plans had come to naught. He'd be angry . . . until Deaizul had the power of the forest in his grasp. After that, the zulkir's anger would be too little, too late.

The carnelian token the spy master kept pinned to her robe grew warm, then hot. She unclasped it and dropped it on the

table where it shimmered with its own heat. The blood-red stone bulged, became a pair of lips that opened to shape one word, "Now." It was Aznar Thrul's voice.

The summons couldn't be a coincidence, yet it had to be. The zulkir couldn't already know what she herself had just learned. The spy master assembled her old woman's disguise and hurried out of the bolt-hole. The chamberlain expected her; another first, like the exploding eggs. Even more disconcerting, he didn't wheedle or harass her, didn't want coins before opening the proper doors, didn't insist that she change into a flimsy gauze robe.

"The Mighty Tharchion, Mightier Zulkir awaits you in the smaller audience chamber," he said, tall and stiff and going out of his way not to touch her.

The spy master swallowed hard. Her mouth was pasty and sour. She wished she had something to drink, something potent. Failing that, she calmed herself with the knowledge that Deaizul was alive. His essence egg was secure in her bolt-hole cabinet, safe beside her own.

Her calm melted when she entered the small audience chamber where the zulkir sat, in robes of darkest crimson, behind a table and an opened box identical in every way to the one in which she kept the essence eggs. Nearly a score of the padded compartments were empty, dusted with glass shards and rust-colored powder. But the worst was in the upper right corner. Where her box had two completely empty compartments, corresponding to the places where her own egg and Deaizul's had once rested, Aznar Thrul's held two glowing, fragile essence eggs.

"I see you recognize this," the zulkir said. His words were winter ice, stinging the spy master's flesh.

"My lord, it is remarkably similar to a box Deaizul once showed me."

"Do not imagine you can deceive me any longer with misdirection and half-truths, woman. It is the twin—the precise double—of the box you keep in your private

chamber behind the Sahuagin Tavern, in a locked cabinet. The doors are painted red."

"I meant only that Deaizul once showed me a second box, my lord."

"More lies! Deaizul thought there was but one box, and so did you! So careful, weren't you, collecting just enough flesh and blood to decoct a few drops of mortal essence to mix with the dragon wing and blood pearl? And buying your own reagents with plain coins. Oh so careful, and oh so clever. Do you think I became zulkir because I am a mooncalf fool, woman? I knew where you traded! You bargain so hard for my dragon wing, my blood pearl, and—for good measure—a few grains of red iron and cinnabar mixed with the dragon wing and mustard oil smeared ever-so-lightly over the pearls. Can you guess what I did?"

She could. The iron could attract another spell, the cinnabar—converted to minute quantities of quicksilver by the mustard oil—would reflect the essence to another location: the inside of Aznar Thrul's duplicate eggs. She felt ill. It wouldn't last. The dead didn't vomit.

"You sent two teams into the Yuirwood. Two. You only mentioned one. You said the other one was from Mythrell'aa. What were you thinking of?"

"One team failed in the village, my lord." Her doom sat in the open box. Even so, she wouldn't concede, wouldn't beg for mercy that wouldn't be forthcoming, not from Aznar Thrul. "I sent a second, to be certain mistakes were not repeated. I didn't want you to worry—"

"Worry? No, indeed, I'm not worried. Certain mistakes will never be repeated."

Thrul picked up a glowing egg: hers, unless he'd switched them. The eggs were identical. The essences they contained were indistinguishable, hence the carefully labeled compartments.

"Where is your lover, Deaizul?" the zulkir asked.

"I have not seen him in over a year."

"Then you do not know that he's in the Yuirwood? You do not know that his body was destroyed when he possessed a certain half-breed who—it turned out—was not quite the innocent he'd seemed."

"My lord, Deaizul often possessed those he spied upon. He lived their lives and served Thay until the Salamander Wars. His nerves broke."

Thrul took the second egg from the upper right corner. He juggled them from one hand to the other, he feigned clumsiness, but never lost control. It was however, impossible to guess which was which. "And you, woman, how are your nerves today?"

"My nerves are as they always have been. I have nothing to hide, my lord."

"Nothing but a plan hatched between you, your lover, and Mythrell'aa to lure me out of Bezantur with illusions of Aglarondan treasure. No, woman—mistakes will not be repeated."

He smashed the eggs together. The spy master's last thought, as her essence escaped, was that Aznar Thrul was a greater fool than she'd imagined possible.

* * * * *

Rizcarn had been stumbling and walking erratically for the last leg of the trek to the Sunglade. Behind him, Alassra and Halaern had exchanged more than a few worried glances. Nothing more than that was possible with the circlet resting on the queen's brow rather the forester's. In addition to watching Rizcarn, Alassra kept an eye on the Yuirwood itself. Centuries of experience dealing with corrupt wizards argued that Mythrell'aa wouldn't move again until they were in the Sunglade and the full moon was directly overhead. But centuries of experience wouldn't accurately predict the future.

The sun was an orange blaze sinking through rose and amber clouds when they cleared the ridge that girdled the Sunglade like a mother's open arms. It had been years—

decades—since Alassra's one and only visit to the Yuirwood's best known, most mysterious stone circle. She'd forgotten how small it was. The inner circle wasn't more than five paces across—scarcely enough for eleven Cha'Tel'Quessir, a goddess and a dancing horse.

The Sunblade grew as they descended the ridge, a natural phenomenon of perspective and light from the setting sun. Rays struck mica crystals in the black granite stones and transformed them into giant jewels. Seeing the stones at sunset made it easy to understand why they were collectively called the Sunblade. Age and power hung in the air, not malicious, merely watching, waiting, as they had for centuries or millennia.

Alassra was awed, as she hadn't been during her other visit. Then the Sunblade had been a relic from another time, irrelevant to the Aglarond the Simbul ruled from Velprintalar. Now, looking out through Chayan SilverBranch's eyes, she felt the sad yearning of forgotten gods.

"I am not so certain I should go closer," she said, for Halaern's ears alone. "This is a Cha'Tel'Quessir place. It belongs to the Cha'Tel'Quessir alone." Alassra heard her own words: she had missed a turning point somewhere in her own mind. The Cha'Tel'Quessir weren't half-anything; they were fully themselves with a unique heritage and a destiny that could not be assumed by either humans or the Tel'Quessir.

Halaern studied her, a ghost of a smile playing with the corners of his mouth. "I am very glad you came back to the Yuirwood, cousin."

Other words would have been unnecessary and unwise. The Cha'Tel'Quessir around them had accepted the forester's sudden appearance, but their opinions of Chayan SilverBranch hadn't changed since she'd said that Zandilar the Dancer had healed Rizcarn's son. They accepted her as they might not accept Aglarond's queen.

They were fifty paces short of the Sunblade's outer ring, with

Rizcarn some ten paces ahead of them, when Rizcarn stumbled again and, this time, fell to the ground.

"The Yuirwood expressing its opinion?" Alassra asked, breaking into a run.

Halaern remained behind, using his position as forester and elder of a most respected tree-family to keep the other eight Cha'Tel'Quessir from crowding his queen as she looked for signs of Red Wizardry. The Simbul was grateful, but she wanted his opinion.

"Cousin?"

He knelt beside her. "What is it?"

"A man asleep, as near as I can tell. That gash on his face wants mending and I haven't wanted to touch it for fear of tipping my hand, as it were."

"You wish me to try?"

Alassra nodded. The forester's healing talents were enhanced by the circlet she'd given him, but not derived from it. All the foresters practiced a form of simple druidry unique to the Yuirwood and effective within its bounds. Halaern laid his hands on either side of the gash, near Rizcarn's temples. He closed his eyes a moment, then sat back on his heels, frowning.

"This is Rizcarn," he whispered. "Once dead and crazy as a magpie in spring, but Rizcarn all the same. We've suspected him wrongly, my lady."

"I think otherwise, cousin. I think whatever had a hold of him has let go—for good. What bothers me is I have no idea to whom or what we owe this bit of good fortune. I was hoping you'd detect a Cha'Tel'Quessir god's hand moving through his thoughts."

"He serves Relkath, my lady. It is a thankless service. The gods of the Yuirwood—" Halaern shrugged. "Some things are best left asleep. Do you wish me to heal his face and arm?"

Flesh knit together under the forester's capable fingers, leaving jagged scars that would fade with time. Rizcarn hadn't moved during the healing nor when they called his

name. They were exchanging worried glances again and the Cha'Tel'Quessir were creeping closer when Rizcarn's eyes fluttered open. He sat up too quickly and fell back with a groan. Halaern leapt to his feet and, spreading his arms, kept the Cha'Tel'Quessir at a distance while Alassra waited until Rizcarn was ready to sit again, then stand.

"How are you feeling?"

Rizcarn pursed his lips and gave the question evident thought. "Better."

He cocked his head, staring at the woman who had helped him. Once before he'd stared at Chayan, and the Simbul had looked away, fearing that his dark eyes could pierce her deceptions. She had no similar sense this time, though it was obvious Rizcarn was recalling memories and reorganizing his thoughts. He let out his breath with a weary sigh.

"I have not been myself, Chayan SilverBranch. These have been terrible days. Terrible, terrible days since Relkath told me where to find my son with Zandilar's Dancer."

Alassra was inclined to agree, but surprised that he saw events the same way. "Your son is missing, taken, we think, by Red Wizards from Thay." She watched for Rizcarn's reaction.

"A terrible thing. Yes. Such a man waited for me, a Red Wizard from Thay. I killed him, but that wasn't enough. He became part of me. I turned to Relkath, but there was nothing Relkath could do, so I did what I was meant to do while Relkath found a way to free me."

"Now, as we drew close to the Sunglade, Relkath overcame the Red Wizard's influence?" It was not an explanation the Simbul had considered.

"I am myself again. I am here at the Sunglade with the Cha'Tel'Quessir. I have done Relkath's work and he has rewarded me. There is no doubt in my mind, Chayan SilverBranch. How can there be doubt in yours? You serve Zandilar; I see her presence within you. Through you, she

healed my son—" Rizcarn took Alassra's arm and pulled her closer so he could whisper in her ear. "Relkath forgives you for last night, during the storm. He was only trying to free me. You should not have fought him."

Alassra smiled. "I didn't know," she said and nodded awkwardly when he released her arm. Rizcarn was, as Halaern said, "Once dead and crazy as a magpie in spring." He was, however, as much himself as he was ever likely to be and—for whatever reason, with whatever help—free of Thayan influence.

He took her arm again, suddenly and tightly. "Lanig . . . Lanig! Relkath, forgive me! I killed my friend Lanig because he guessed I was not myself."

The Simbul pried herself loose. "That is between you and Relkath."

"Yes. Yes, you're right. I will listen to the trees. There is still time. The moon won't rise until the sky is dark. Zandilar won't come until midnight. There's time. I will tell the others what they must do."

Rizcarn moved out of her shadow. He took a few steps toward Halaern and the others, then stopped, staring at the forester as if he hadn't expected to see him.

"Trovar YuirWood, old friend, why are you here?" Rizcarn's tone belied his greeting.

Halaern separated from the other Cha'Tel'Quessir. "I go where I'm needed. I was needed here."

"This is not your path, Trovar YuirWood. You chose a different one a long time ago. Giving that crown to your cousin changes nothing in your heart, Trovar YuirWood. You don't belong here."

To Alassra's surprise, her friend simply nodded and started walking away. She called him back, the verdigrised circlet in her outstretched hand. He replaced it on his brow.

I would rather you stayed. There's no telling what he'll do without the Red Wizard keeping him sane! Alassra meant the words in jest, though there was truth in them.

He serves Relkath, my lady. I serve you. The breach cannot be spanned. I won't be far.

The Simbul watched him go, wondering if every Cha'Tel'Quessir had to work out his or her personal relationship with the Yuirwood gods, just like every human and every elf. When Rizcarn muttered, "Good riddance!" at the forester's shadow she lost her infamous temper.

"We needed him!" she shouted, then—remembering that Rizcarn thought she served Zandilar—she added. "I needed him. Who will dance with me? Who will ride my damned horse?"

Rizcarn was unperturbed. "Wait. Be patient. Relkath will provide."

* * * * *

Alassra Shentrantra did not wait well. She had never mastered patience. She went into the forest to seal herself in silence and prepare the spells she thought she might need later in the evening. That didn't take much time; she was always prepared for trouble. Her eight Cha'Tel'Quessir companions, whatever their other virtues—and she was certain they must have some—were as interesting as the sky on a cloudless day. Halaern was out in the laurel. Bro was imprisoned, enduring torment only a zulkir would imagine. And Rizcarn was sitting in the middle of the inner stone circle, once again aglow with a silver-green aura. By Alassra's best guess, the moon was still several handspans below the eastern horizon. She'd begun to wonder how long it would take one of Mystra's immortal Chosen to die of sheer boredom.

She counted the stars as they appeared in the twilight sky. There were three hundred and twenty-two when Rizcarn hoisted himself to his feet.

"The 'Glade," he announced, "is ready. We are ready to dance for Zandilar."

Truth to tell, Alassra Shentrantra wasn't much of a dancer, either. Court dances with their pattern steps were worse

than boring and the ecstatic dancing Rizcarn described asked too much of a wizard who enjoyed spontaneity only when she was in complete control of it. When Rizcarn proposed that she dance alone at the center of the circles while he led the Cha'Tel'Quessir in a vine dance among the inner stones she came within a heartbeat of heading straight back to Velprintalar.

"I thought Zandilar was going to do all the dancing," she protested.

"Zandilar will! Zandilar will awaken from the ground. She will become one with you, Chayan. You and she will dance together."

"Someone else should have the honor. I've been away from the Yuirwood for so long that I've forgotten how to dance."

She looked toward the women among the Cha'Tel'Quessir: three of them, each young enough to seduce a man with their dancing. They all refused to meet Alassra's eyes.

"You are the one to dance Zandilar's part," Rizcarn persisted.

"You serve her; she's chosen you. It doesn't matter where you've been. The dance is part of you; your body remembers it from childhood. Come." He beckoned her toward the circles. "Take your place."

Grimly—she'd rather face a score of Red Wizards, ten-score of Red Wizards—Alassra unbuckled her sword belt. "Will there be music?" she asked as she walked past Rizcarn. "Or do I have to remember that, too?"

Rizcarn produced a set of silver pipes. "I will make the melody, the forest and the 'Glade will make the rest."

There were ten stones in the inner circle; one for each of them. Alassra read Relkath's name on one, Magnar and Elikarashae on two more, Zandilar's on a fourth, above the old Espruar rune for dancing. If she had a place, then Zandilar's stone was it and she started for it.

The Simbul wasn't Zandilar. She wasn't a dancer. There were six other stones in the circle whose inscriptions had been eroded. She picked one of those stones, the northernmost

stone.

"That's the wrong stone!" Rizcarn shouted.

On impulse, Alassra knelt before the stone. She traced what remained of its inscription. There were no legible marks. It was as if its god's name had been chiseled out before time had begun its work.

"Zandilar's stone, in the west, where the moon's light will surround you."

"This is my stone," the Simbul informed him, using a tone that made gods think twice before arguing with her.

Rizcarn—or his god—got the message. "We will begin together. Chayan, you will move to the center when it is the right time." He anticipated her next question. "You will know when it is the right time. There will be no doubt."

It was plain awkward at first. Alassra was conscious of every knee, ankle, elbow, and wrist. Her back was rigid and her hips simply would not sway to the twisting, twirling music that came from Rizcarn's silver pipes. No Red Wizard or Zhentarim mage had devised a crueller torture. As moonlight peeked through the trees, awkwardness became anger—the childish, self-destructive anger that had worried her Rashemaar guardians centuries ago. Alassra struck the man behind her hard enough to knock him to the ground; she only wished it had been Rizcarn and that the whole farce would come to a halt.

But Rizcarn was out of reach on the other side of the Cha'Tel'Quessir vine. To reach him, she'd have to move across the circle. That would be dancing, alone, and the time would never be right for that.

Never.

The moon rose above the ridge, huge and so bright it hurt, like the sun, to look at its face. Anger, frustration, and the knowledge that it was hours until dawn, pushed Alassra Shentrantra to distraction. She seized her hair—Chayan's brown hair—and pulled it out by the roots, letting her hair—the Simbul's silver hair—flow into its place. She became

blue eyed again, and pale skinned. She threw back her head and screamed.

The power of the Yuirwood, so like the lightning essence she called upon when she fought her enemies and yet so different, too, rose within her. It burst through the pores of her skin, her eyes and mouth, the tips of her fingers. And then, as suddenly as it had ebbed, the essence waned.

"Who will come away with me?"

Rizcarn's music had stopped. The question came from the center of the circle where a silver-form woman stood beside a twilight horse.

"Who will dance with me?"

Alassra waited with the others. Her scream, and the power that answered it, had brought a sense of peace, of oneness with the world around her, that she had rarely known before. She was ready for whatever Relkath—or the Zulkir of Illusion—provided. The subtle play of magic beyond the paired circles didn't disturb her. Two people, possibly three, stepped from the shadows of magic to the shadows of the Yuirwood: Mythrell'aa—tiny, hairless, and patterned like a deadly snake—and one, possibly two, man-shaped companions.

"Who will dance with me?" Zandilar asked.

One of Mythrell'aa's companions started walking forward. Alassra readied a spell that would release four others: three to punch through Mythrell'aa's defenses, one to whisk Bro to safety. It wouldn't take a gesture or even a word to loose them; a thought, an intention would be sufficient and not even a zulkir's reflexes would be fast enough to counteract them.

She waited for the optimum moment when Bro was closer to her than to Mythrell'aa, for the moment she could see his face.

Not his face.

Not the face of Ebroin of MightyTree, but the face of Lailomun Zerad, smiling, laughing, running toward her.

The Yuirwood, in Aglarond

Nearing midnight, the twenty-fifth day of Eleasias, The Year of the Banner (1368DR)

Lauzoril had ridden the marble stallion for two days and nights without rest, guiding it across the breadth of Thay and into the unknown realm of Aglarond and its forest. The knife was his target, a bright star in his mind that had kept him on an unerring course until, suddenly, it had vanished early in the previous afternoon. He'd pressed on, pointed to the place where he'd last felt its presence: a poor excuse for a path through the everywhere tangle of laurel and briar that bothered the stallion not at all but had made the zulkir's life a misery since they'd entered the Yuirwood.

Spent magic had lain heavy on the ground where the knife had vanished. Lauzoril had determined that his knife, and the youth who carried it, had been snatched by a wizard and had been either taken very far away or was being held nearby under impenetrable, undetectable warding. Warding was the greater possibility, and Lauzoril had run down his mental list of Faerun wizards capable of hiding from a Thayan zulkir. He'd put the Zulkirs of Illusion and Invocation at the top and Aglarond's queen close by.

Then he'd backtracked the ground trails his spells had revealed. One had led him to two bands of Red Wizards, all dead, stripped of their magic artifacts, all Invokers or archers paid in Bezantur coin. The others had come together in a grove not far from the place where the knife had vanished. From there the trail had been easy enough to follow. Lauzoril had hoped it would lead him to the knife and the youth who'd captured his daughter's attention.

Instead it had led to sunset and a relic from another time: a generous score of rough-hewn stones rising from the ground like a dragon's teeth. The stallion, normally the most obedient of magical creatures, balked and would not descend the ridge from which they'd first viewed the stones.

Just as well: there was little cover between the ridge and the stones where the chattel-kessir had ended their journey.

Lauzoril hid the stallion in the laurel, marking the location carefully in his mind. The trees and bushes were all alike to his eyes, accustomed as they were to the open land of Thazalhar. He liked the place, though, despite the discomforts of whiplash bushes and the countless tree limbs that crossed the stallion's straight-line path at the precise height of a mounted rider's forehead. And as for the Yuirwood's vaunted inhibition of spellcraft: he'd experienced none of it. The usual spells by which he guided the stallion had performed flawlessly, and the enchantment he cast over the horse to hide it yielded a moss-covered boulder as rugged and ancient as the stones beyond the ridge.

Don't believe, the dagger Shazzelurt had hissed in the zulkir's mind while he contemplated his spellcraft. Nothing is what it seems, Master. Nothing is unwatched. Leave, Master. Leave now!

The blade told the truth. The Aglarondan forest was thoroughly haunted—almost as haunted as the rolling hills of Thazalhar. Shazzelurt didn't approve of Thazalhar, either. Hiding himself as he'd hidden the horse, Lauzoril had settled down on the ridge crest to watch the chattel-kessir and wait until the air was dark enough for him to risk getting closer.

In Thay, the art and craft stealth was the province of assassins and though a good many Red Wizards worked as assassins in the hard years after they left their academies, Lauzoril hadn't been among them. He hadn't learned to move quietly until he was living in Thazalhar and wished not to disturb the fragile prairies as he walked through them. The zulkir had always been a good student; he eased down the ridge toward the stone circle unobserved, in advance of the rising moon.

The sense of magic grew stronger with each step, and though it didn't oppose his passage, Lauzoril quickly believed that it could, and in ways a Thayan zulkir would be

helpless to counter—a belief that Shazzelurt confirmed continually in his mind until, with an act of will, Lauzoril had made himself deaf to the knife's complaints.

Lauzoril watched an argument brew between two of the chattel-kessir, a brown-haired woman and a brown-skinned man. He wasn't able to grasp its substance: They spoke their own language here, a language he didn't understand. It occurred to the zulkir, as he waited beyond the outer, taller circle, that he might successfully rescue the mongrel youth—even bring him back to the Thazalhar estate to serve his daughter—and be unable to speak with him. The Thayan dialect, though heavily influenced by Mulhorandi, was intelligible everywhere in Faerun, and elven types invariably understood common human speech; the challenge was getting them to admit it before they died of stubbornness.

He hoped it wouldn't come to that. He hoped he'd still have the chance to be the hero for Mimuay; and for the mongrel youth as well, who ought to be grateful to whoever rescued him from the Zulkir of Illusion or the Simbul of Aglarond. With the discovery of the partially looted Red Wizard corpses Lauzoril judged it unlikely that Invocation was behind the snatch. Aznar Thrul would never have left the gold and jewelry behind.

The argument ended with the woman laying down her weapons and entering the inner circle. The other chattel-kessir—crouched behind the tall stones, in the subtle draft of their power, the zulkir had begun to wish he knew what these people called themselves. They had a greater dignity than he'd imagined for them, a greater grace and beauty—even the stubborn woman who didn't want to dance and had been cajoled into leading the others.

Slaves danced in Thay, when they thought they could get away with it, making music on logs, bits of pottery and cast-off furniture, unless they'd been purchased for entertainment. Red Wizards never danced, even romantically inclined enchanters. The zulkir watched,

enraptured, as the simple pipe melody grew complicated and wild. The stubborn woman surrendered to the swirling rhythm. She tore her hair and was transformed.

Lauzoril sat back, cursing himself for ignoring Shazzelurt's warnings. He expanded his awareness—his suspicions. The youth had been snatched by Mythrell'aa of Illusion because the woman, the stubborn woman whose brown hair now flowed silver in the moonlight was Aglarond's queen, the Simbul. He recognized her from descriptions Red Wizard spies funneled back to Thay and, more reliably, from the one time when he'd spied through his knife and felt her essence in his mind. He was a dead man if she felt his presence half as acutely. But, having abandoned herself to the music, she seemed oblivious to the world beyond the stones.

And then there was a column of light within the dancers' circle. It widened and coalesced into a horse—likely the twilight horse Aznar Thrul's spy master had mentioned—and a splendid woman formed from moonlight and mist. She said something in the forest language. The music stopped.

Lauzoril discovered that he was on his feet and had taken a step toward the light.

Shazzelurt manifested in the zulkir's thoughts, ever ready to dominate and exploit a weakened mind. Lauzoril's thoughts snapped into familiar patterns. He threw off the dagger's influence, and the silver-form woman's as well, just in time to sense magic hanging some ten or fifteen paces, withershins, away outside the circle.

A gate opened from another place, an illusory place, shrouded in shadow: Mythrell'aa's place. When the gate closed, three figures stood outside the circle: a woman and two men, a zulkir and her minions. One of them was the youth he and Mimuay had seen in the scrying bowl. The other, answering the silver-form woman's call, started walking toward the stone circles.

Be wary, Master. Begone. He bears the mark of Gur.

The mark of Gur, Lusaka Gur who taught the Red Wizards

how to die effectively, and running, now, toward the Simbul. Nearing the end of his fifth decade, the Zulkir of Enchantment was a wizard in full command of his talent, but it hadn't always been that way. As a young man, Lauzoril had become zulkir strictly on the quickness of his wits and his willingness to commit himself—to plunge blindly, if the naked truth were admitted—into action. Surprised or cornered, he was still that bold young man, but, now that he was a zulkir, he could cast spells of his school by will alone.

Lauzoril boldly cast a sphere of freedom and disenchantment on the running man. It wouldn't rid him of Gur's mark, but it would insure that he knew who he was taking with him when he died. The zulkir had a hunch that it wouldn't be Aglarond's witch-queen. Then, for his daughter, Lauzoril whispered the word that would transport him to Mythrell'aa's side. He was, perhaps, the last person Lady Illusion expected to see emerging from the Yuirwood shadows and she had never been the most quick-witted among the zulkirs. While her tattooed brow writhed in confusion, Lauzoril grabbed the bleak-faced mongrel with one hand and with the other delivered a bone-crushing punch to Mythrell'aa's sharp nose.

Magic spells had their place in Thay, but a well-made fist was still a man's best weapon in close quarters. Blood streamed down the zulkir's face as she crumpled to the ground. Freed from enchantment and whatever other compulsions Mythrell'aa kept about him, the marked man had stopped running. He stared at his arm—why, Lauzoril couldn't guess—then changed his course, running back the way he'd come, running toward him and Mythrell'aa as if his life—his death—depended on it.

Lauzoril wrapped both arms around the mongrel and broke the seal on a coward's retreat—a tiny enchanted artifact attached to his belt—that brought him, and the youth in his arm, back to his moss-covered stone horse just as the mark of Gur shook the ground.

* * * * *

Alassra couldn't stop. She couldn't stop the tears. She couldn't stop the tumbling between here and there, then and now. She couldn't stop, because she didn't want to.

For one moment, Lailomun was coming toward her: the love of her life whom she believed was dead, whom she hoped had died more than a century ago. He'd been smiling as he ran toward her with the mark of Gur incandescent on his brow. Alassra knew that mark and its variations. She'd seen it glowing on countless Red Wizards in the moments before they destroyed themselves utterly. Since coming to Aglarond, the Simbul had carefully researched the various spells of Lusaka Gur and found ways to foil them. Wisely, she'd made those foils a thoughtless part of her defenses—if she'd had to think, if she'd had to act consciously to defend herself from Lailomun, Mythrell'aa would have had her victory.

But a spell had come out of nowhere—from Zandilar, perhaps, or the Yuirwood itself protecting the sacred Sunglade. It had fallen around Lailomun's shoulders, and he'd stopped running. He'd looked at her, all love and longing. He'd looked at his arm—why, Alassra couldn't guess. He'd said something; she'd seen his lips move, but the sound hadn't carried and she didn't know what his words had been. Then he'd turned and run back toward Mythrell'aa who'd collapsed—from shock or horror—before the mark of Gur consumed him.

The mark was a powerful spell as Lusaka Gur devised it, but Mythrell'aa had compounded its effect. The blast sphere was larger and more destructive; and when it touched the outer limit of the Simbul's habitual defenses it triggered the counterspells she'd researched long ago. The spells would have carried her back to Velprintalar, if she'd let them, but Alassra chose drifting, tumbling, wallowing between guilt and despair.

It wasn't easy for a wizard of the Simbul's experience to lose

herself, but she tried and settled, eventually, in a place of gentle darkness.

"You have found me. You are welcome, but you cannot remain here."

The voice came from all directions. It was a sadly wise woman's voice, very much like Mystra's voice when the goddess first appeared to Alassra in the Outer Planes. The Simbul gathered her wits: her defenses and might. Her strength of mind and magic was the main reason Alassra Shentrantra could never lose herself. She hovered in the darkness and studied it. There was form around her, shifting veils of angular shadow surrounding a faint, but clear, light.

"Who are you?"

"Ask yourself."

Alassra locked her despair and grief in corner of her memory to which she might—or might not—return. She was in the presence of divine power—not Mystra—and it demanded her full attention.

"I am Alassra Shentrantra, Queen of Aglarond, called the Simbul."

The light within the shifting shadows grew stronger. Alassra remembered the stone she'd called her own. The truth was suddenly so obvious she could only marvel at the ancient magic that had kept it concealed. And though there was no ground beneath her feet, Alassra got down on her knees.

"But you are the Simbul. I knelt before your stone; I kneel before you now."

"Stand before me, Alassra. Though you were never meant to see my face, it is too late for worship. You cannot remain in here. You must go back."

Alassra stood. "I will." She cleared her throat. "I serve ... Another goddess chose me."

The sharp veils fluttered with amusement. "Mystra. Yes. I know all about you, Alassra Shentrantra. To be forgotten is not the same as being blind or deaf. Your goddess sent you to Aglarond."

"Intentionally?" Alassra asked bluntly.

She hadn't asked to be Chosen, might well have refused if she'd been given a choice—had refused when Mystra first confronted her after Lailomun's abduction. Mystra hadn't mentioned the Simbul when she suggested Aglarond might be a good place to heal. But goddesses weren't compelled to mention anything and sharing one of her Chosen wouldn't have been entirely unprecedented. Alassra's drow sister, Qilue, was high priestess of Eilistraee in addition to being one of Mystra's Chosen, but that had been arranged before Qilue's birth.

If this sharing was also the result of a six-hundred-year-old bargain, Alassra was going to be angry beyond measure: the end didn't justify the means, not when it was her life in the balance.

The Simbul eased Alassra's worries. "Like you, Queen Ilione's mother was Cha'Tel'Quessir. She remembered her heritage when you first came to her brother's court; she remembered the Simbul."

Alassra shook her head in contradiction. "Nobody knew. It was just a word—not even a name. The stone has been defaced since before the first Cha'Tel'Quessir were born." She thought about the other vacant Sunblade stones and the bits of legend the elven sages had revealed in Everlund. "The Yuir gods: Relkath, Zandilar, Magnar ... you were adopted by the Seldarine, absorbed by them, and then forgotten?"

The shadow light dimmed slightly. "It wasn't supposed to happen that way. Our race—our mortal kindred—was besieged. The bonds between us were doomed. Our realm was doomed. We had chosen another path and it led nowhere ... it led here. The Tel'Quessir came from elsewhere. They weren't besieged, but they needed a place in Abeir-toril. Our heritage passed to the Sy-Tel'Quessir, who swore to cherish, nurture and protect it."

"But they couldn't do that for something they were afraid of.

I met with elven sages at Everlund. If you know all about me, you know what they said."

"Fierce," the Simbul replied. "Fierce and reckless: that is what Ilione saw and why she gave you my name. I had not had a presence for so long . . . My moment had been forgotten before the Yuir passed into the wood."

"So, that's what I am—a wild and reckless presence in Aglarond. Rizcarn is Relkath's magpie in the Yuirwood. Are there others?"

"Magnar hopes for a strong man. Zandilar wanted a child—and a dancer."

Alassra thought of the carnage she'd escaped. "She didn't get what she wanted, did she?"

"She has more than most of us. There's always a place for Zandilar. Her moment cannot be forgotten; her power will always be remembered. You have not asked, Alassra Shentrantra, what the Simbul is. When were we not forgotten, why were we remembered?"

"I'm not so sure I want to know."

"When the Tel'Quessir came, they asked me to choose between Labelas Enoreth, the Seldarine power of time and philosophy, and Erevan Ilesere, their power of change—"

Powers, moments, and presence, Alassra thought, but not gods. The Simbul spoke of Mystra as a goddess, but she had not applied the word to herself.

"I became the power of balance allied to Labelas Enoreth—"

"But you're not balance. I'm not balance. I've been hearing that all my life."

The shadows rippled with laughter like the breaking of fine glass bells and the light brightened again. "I am the edge, Alassra Shentrantra. When the hunter facing the charging beast has to decide whether to throw his spear, whether to dodge, and the moment to do either, I am that moment. I was. When the hunted comes to two paths and, knowing neither, must still choose between them, I am that moment of choice. I am the edge of the cliff, the bending branch, the

moment when you must jump. When you decide, without knowing why, without knowing anything at all, at that moment I am with you."

"I think I understand the problem. The Tel'Quessir aren't like that at all—well, maybe the drow. You'd have done better with humans."

"We began with humans, when humans were young and the gods you know had yet to be imagined, and we bargained futilely and to our detriment with the drow."

"Now you have the Cha'Tel'Quessir who are looking for gods, not moments. Gods who will make them a mighty people."

The Simbul said nothing.

"There's always more," Alassra complained. "More than can be told. More that can't be revealed."

"More that is not known!" The Simbul roared and the Simbul's namesake fought to keep her place against the wind. "Knowledge comes after the moment!"

They faced each other in the nowhere realm of forgotten gods.

"I am going back," Alassra said, with no particular grace or friendship. "I know the way."

"I give you a gift."

"I refuse."

"It is only advice, Alassra Shentrantra. I've already given you my name; I have nothing else to give."

In her heart, Alassra didn't believe that, but she stayed to hear.

"The hunter practices with his spear, the hunted learns every path in the forest but they survive because when they come to the edge, they give themselves to the edge and the edge guides them."

"So?"

"You could have had a child tonight, Alassra Shentrantra. You could have a child any day or any night, but you will never have a child if you turn back from the edge."

Cutting words surfaced in Alassra's mind. She drove them

back. The Simbul's advice wasn't a threat—or even a promise. She had made too much of wanting Elminster's child, her way, her time, her place; she'd gotten in her own way, pushed herself further from her desires—if they were truly her desires.

Pushed herself further from the edge.

"I'll think about it." Alassra found the spell in her mind that would take her back to the Sunglade—whatever remained of it. "I'll think about it, and I'll remember."

"That is all I ask, Alassra Shentrantra. Remember the Simbul. Remember what has been forgotten."

* * * * *

Dawn came to the stone circles the Cha'Tel'Quessir called the Sunglade. Lauzoril had learned the proper names, the proper pronunciations from the young man seated opposite him. Ebroin's eyes were still hollow and haunted. His body bore the marks of Mythrell'aa's cruelty. The zulkir had offered assistance: he carried various elixirs and had bribed the rudiments of healing from a dissolute priestess of Myrkul before the death god died.

Ebroin refused Thayan magic. He said he'd wait for Zandilar. Lauzoril didn't argue: the young man was in no danger from his wounds and he, too, was waiting, but not for Zandilar. If anyone else escaped the last night's destruction it would be the Simbul.

The Cha'Tel'Quessir couldn't see the scorched ground, the bits of hair and leather that marked a circle twenty paces across, centered at the place where Mythrell'aa had fallen and including all but the northernmost stones of the outer circle. Lauzoril saw it all, and though he felt no regret for those who'd died—least of all Lady Illusion, if she were dead—he understood that there were sights a survivor of Illusion's brand of cruelty need not have written in his memory. The zulkir had charmed Ebroin with a simple spell that left the young man seeing what he wanted most to see. The spell would fade by midday. Lauzoril intended to be

gone before then. He hadn't decided whether he'd be traveling alone or with a half-elf behind him. The Simbul might help him decide, when she reappeared. He was confident that she would, as confident as Ebroin was about Zandilar.

Lauzoril felt magic gather within the inner circle. He laid a hand on Ebroin's arm and motioned for him to stand. Not a complete fool, the zulkir positioned the Cha'Tel'Quessir between himself and the gathering magic and dug a fingernail into the seal of another coward's retreat—he habitually carried a half-score of them in the studs of his belt. The hanging spell coalesced; the Simbul, silver haired, blue eyed, and wearing the soft leathers she'd worn in the moonlight, stepped onto charred grass, scorched soil.

Ebroin flinched. The zulkir clamped a firm hand on the shoulder of his mortal shield.

"Steady, lad. I told you who she would be."

He couldn't see the Cha'Tel'Quessir's face but if Mimuy were to see it, she'd say his eyes were sadder, more frightened than ever. The zulkir had listened half the night to a young man's futile dreams. He could feel them crumbling.

"Lord Lauzoril? The Mighty Zulkir of Enchantment and Charm?"

So she did know him. He smiled and nodded his head ever so slightly, not letting his eyes drift from her face, though surely she could cast her spells by will as well as he could. "If you are the Simbul, Queen of Aglarond, then I am the Zulkir of Enchantment. Lord Tavai—Lauzoril is my given name."

A fourth figure separated from the undamaged bushes beyond the circles. The zulkir had known he and Ebroin were not alone, but the observer had made no move against them. The newcomer made such a move now, aiming a bow at Lauzoril's flank and having the right angle to deliver it cleanly, unless Lauzoril shoved Ebroin to the left, which he didn't.

The archer shouted, "He is a Red Wizard, my lady," and pulled the bowstring. "He has held Ebroin since—since midnight."

Lauzoril shouted back: "I am the Zulkir of Enchantment and you are alive only because I have no reason to slay you. Do not give me that reason."

The archer wavered then brought the arrow back into line. Lauzoril judged the distance and chose an appropriate spell. Ebroin was shaking badly; he'd collapse without a hand to steady him.

"If he is yours, my lady," the zulkir suggested to Aglarond's queen. "Tell him to stand down."

"Halaern, old friend—"

"When he releases Ebroin."

Lauzoril met the blue eyes that had been the doom of hundreds—thousands—of Red Wizards over the last century. He gave Ebroin a shove forward. The young man took three steps, stumbling toward his queen, then got his balance and stopped.

"Ebroin," the zulkir advised. "If I trust her, then you must also."

But in a gathering of recklessly stubborn people, the young Cha'Tel'Quessir could hold his own. "All gods' curse on you, Queen of Aglarond, again and again. You deceived me. You used me!"

Mythrell'aa had chosen the wrong messenger: If she'd sent Ebroin forward, the map of Faerun would look much different today.

Thoughts passed between the Simbul and the archer, who at last lowered his bow. He called Ebroin by name and held out his hand. The youth looked at his queen; Lauzoril couldn't see the silent expressions that passed between them. He looked at Lauzoril; the expression was respect, the best that could be shared by enemies, followed by the arched brows of inquiry.

"Go home, Ebroin," the zulkir suggested, having no better or

safer advice to give a stranger. "Go to the place where your heart is at rest and begin your life anew from there." It was the advice he always gave himself and would give to Mimuay when the time came.

The youth lifted his shoulders, standing straighter and with a faint smile on his lips. Then he turned toward the archer. They walked away together, leaving Lauzoril alone with Thay's greatest enemy. She walked toward him.

"Yours is not a face I ever expected to see in the Yuirwood. Why, Lauzoril? Why did you come? To destroy another zulkir? Why have you stayed. You are not Szass Tam, Lauzoril; you don't have a hope against me."

"Oh, I have hope, my lady." He did not have a personal name to fling at her the way she flung his, but no one knew the Simbul's name, not even her own people. "I hope Lady Illusion is quite thoroughly dead, but it is only hope. She isn't foolish enough to leave herself with no way out."

"If she was conscious when Lailomun reached her."

"Ah, Lailomun. You knew him then?"

She appeared annoyed with herself. It was almost as good as a name.

"You came for Mythrell'aa?"

"No, I came for my daughter and for that hot-headed young man who has no idea how lucky he is to be alive."

"Explain yourself."

Lauzoril shook his head. "I don't take orders from foreign queens, my lady. My daughter means everything to me. If you have children . . ." He watched her face grow hard in a heartbeat. "Well, never mind. I did it for her, to be a hero in her eyes before she grows up."

"And learns her poppa is a zulkir?"

It was an insult, but it was also the truth. "Just so. Do you think we eat our young?"

"It had occurred to me more than once."

The zulkir shook his head. He had learned the true name of the Cha'Tel'Quessir, but it wasn't anywhere near enough, not

for Aglarond or Thay. "Then it will never change."

"The Red Wizards will give up their dreams of conquest and domination? No, I don't think it will ever change, Lauzoril."

"I believe that Thay is born to dominate Faerun, but not a Faerun drenched in blood. I don't have any liking for war, my lady, and I've seen too much death."

"You're not yet fifty!"

She'd been fighting his kind for generations. Perhaps that gave her the right to belittle his observations. "I've seen enough for me." He turned and started walking toward the bushes where he'd hidden the stone horse, making his back an easy target.

"Lauzoril!"

He paused, looked over his shoulder.

"Thank you. Thank you for saving Ebroin's life. He has definitely seen too much death."

"My daughter said his heart was sad because we had slain his mother. She thought he was frightened with no one to stand for him. She wanted to save him from the Red Wizards."

"And you did."

"She is my child." Lauzoril saw Mimuay's face in his mind's eye and wondered if she would believe him when he returned to Thazalhar. He started walking again.

"Lauzoril!"

Again, he paused and looked back.

"Lauzoril, I owe you, and I pay my debts. What do you want?"

The witch-queen of Aglarond owing a zulkir! The map of Faerun had changed overnight. He thought of a thousand requests and rejected them all in the space of a heartbeat.

"A name. The name you give to your friends."

She hesitated; he thought she'd refuse, which wasn't a complete surprise. A name, if it could be kept hidden, was a powerful word for any wizard to possess.

"Nethreene."

"Nethreene," Lauzoril repeated. That hot-silver presence he'd felt the night he'd spied upon her while she held the knife pressed against his mind. It is her true name, Shazzelurt insisted. The presence faded. He held out his hand—even in Thay, a handshake was a gesture of trust.

She strode forward and took it. They studied each other, eye to eye. Nethreene's grip was as firm as any man's, but the hand she raised unselfconsciously to touch his cheek was woman-gentle. He didn't risk the same familiarity with her. She seemed disappointed when they stepped apart.

"Consider my name a gift, Lauzoril. Remember it when you look at your daughter. Say it aloud when you need to collect a debt."

"Perhaps I will," he replied with a smile. "Perhaps someday I will."

The zulkir started walking again.

This time the Simbul did not call him back.

About the Author

Lynn Abbey is the co-creator of Thieves World, the first shared-world fantasy series. In addition to numerous non-Thieves World fantasy novels, she has also authored three books in the DARK SUN® series for TSR. She lives in Oklahoma.

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